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Wilderness Framing at the Crossroads of Resource Extraction,
Conservation, Recreation, and Indigenous Continuity

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Abstract

In the United States, the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness is central to a highly publicized public lands dispute. The proposed Twin Metals project seeks to mine the largest undeveloped sulfide mineral deposit in the country, located just kilometers from the Boundary Waters, America's most visited Wilderness area. Advocates assert that sulfide pollution poses an irreversible threat to a region renowned for some of the United States' cleanest water, rarest wildlife, and most beloved outdoor recreational opportunities. Beyond these concerns, the land is essential to the cultural continuity of the Anishinaabe, its Indigenous stewards since time immemorial. However, traditional settler conservation narratives often erase this connection, preferring to present wilderness as untouched and pristine nature. This case study uses a diagnostic frame analysis to unfold how the most impactful organization in the endeavor for protection, Save the Boundary Waters, constructs the land's value. I identify key framing narratives of a pure wilderness, unique ecology, recreational appeal, American legacy, and cultural significance. This paper ultimately discusses how the organization's efforts often reinforce the persistent trend of Indigenous erasure in American environmentalism, revealing a paradox between inclusion efforts and exclusionary conservation narratives. By analyzing these frames, this thesis offers insight into the complexities of current conservation efforts and their implications for Indigenous sovereignty and environmental justice, highlighting the need for more inclusive approaches to land protection.

Keywords: United States, Anishinaabe, Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, Conservation, Frame Analysis, Construction of Place

Word Count: 13,852

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Abbreviations

BWCA Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness

USFS United States Forest Service

1. Introduction

The Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCA) is a 440,000-hectare wilderness area tucked between the Minnesotan shore of Lake Superior and the Canadian Border (U.S. Forest Service, 2023). With over 150,000 visitors annually, it attracts more visitors than any other wilderness area in the United States (Explore Minnesota, 2025). Although often described as a refuge from modern society, the Border Lake region is integral to the existence of the Anishinaabe people (otherwise known as Ojibwe or Chippewa), sustaining their cultural, social, and economic systems for generations (Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, n.d.). Beginning in the 19th century, white settlers systemically designed their violent removal from the area. Nevertheless, their connection with the land and the water continues to be a cultural key to their survival (Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, n.d.).

The Boundary Waters sits on top of the largest known sulfide mineral deposit in the United States, rich in nickel, copper, and platinum-group metals (Mauk et al., 2021). The area is now subject to a proposed sulfide-ore copper mine called Twin Metals (The Mesabi Iron Range, 2017). Sulfide-ore copper mining comes with environmental risks, particularly the potential for acid mine drainage, which poisons surrounding ecosystems (Myers, 2016). As seen in Figure 1, the project is proposed to be built just outside the Wilderness boundary, upstream from its headwaters, within the Rainy River watershed (Wolfe, 2020). There is potential that polluted water could reach as far as the Hudson Bay (Wolfe, 2020).

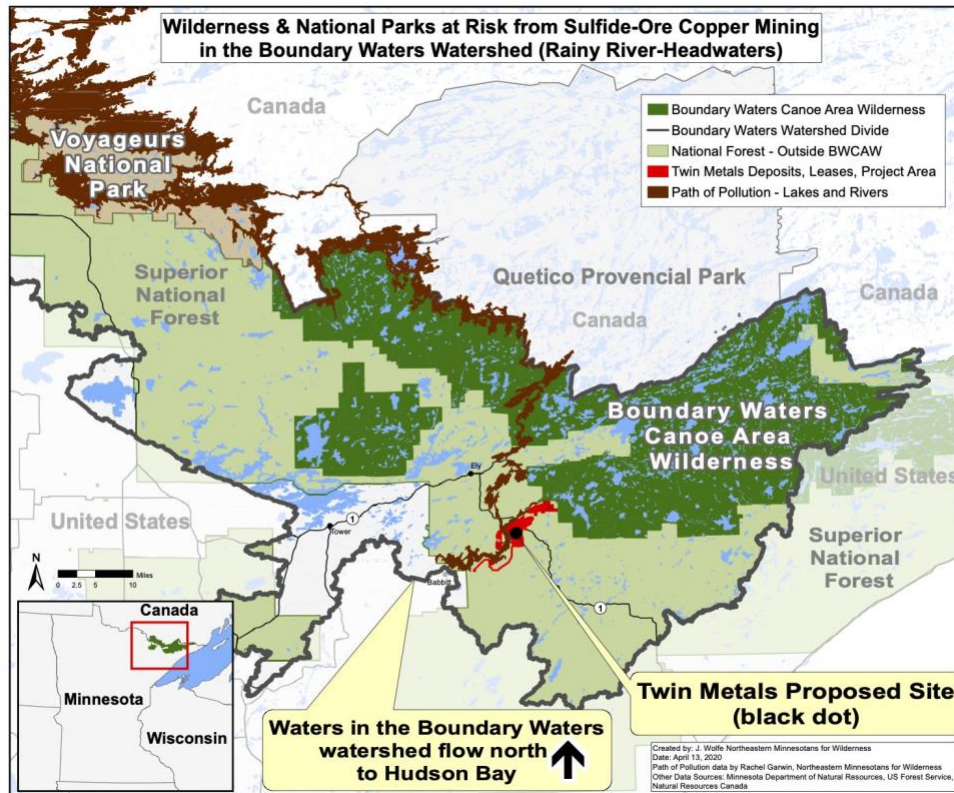


Figure 1 (Wolfe, 2020)

In response, Northeastern Minnesotans for Wilderness founded the campaign Save the Boundary Waters. Over the past decade, their organization has grown, and they now identify themselves as the leader in advocating for the Boundary Waters (Impact Report, 2023, p.11). The potential environmental consequences of this mine extend beyond the site of development, threatening interconnected ecosystems and communities downstream. Their conservation efforts navigate a complex intersection of issues for a diverse collection of stakeholders. This paper explores how Save the Boundary Waters frames the importance of protecting the land and water from sulfate pollution.

1.1 Purpose and Question

This research aims to explore the underlying tensions of tourism, environmentalism, and Indigenous rights in the BWCA at a crucial time for the area's survival. Discussing the colonial roots of wilderness' framing in American conservation is not new (Barnes, 2011; Boggs, 2017; Ho & Chang, 2021; Reid-Hresko & Warren, 2021; Walter, 2023; Whitson, 2020). However, this case examines whether the leading voice opposing the proposed Twin Metals mine, Save the Boundary Waters, aligns their conservation outreach with their stated

commitments to Indigenous sovereignty (Save the Boundary Waters, n.d.). The research question is as follows:

How does Save the Boundary Waters present the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in their conservation efforts against the Twin Metals mine, and does this framing contribute to the erasure of Indigenous people?

1.2 Significance

In 2023, the Zagaakwaandagubowiniwag (Bois Forte Band of Chippewa), Gichi Onigaming (Grand Portage Band of Lake Superior Chippewa), and Nagaajiwanaang (Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa) signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the United States Forest Service (USFS) which recognizes them as the original stewards of the land and ensures Tribal input is incorporated in Forest Service decision making (United States Forest Service, 2023). This, combined with the historic 20-year ban on sulfide-ore copper mining on over 90,000 Hectares in the Rainy River Watershed, seemingly protected the area from future development (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2023).

However, the return of the Trump administration marks a period of immense change in the United States. In February of this year, Pete Stauber, a republican congressman representing Northeastern Minnesota, introduced a bill to reverse the ban and reopen the Superior National Forest to resource extraction (Stauber, 2025). Republicans hold the majority in congress, making this bill easier to pass (Walsh & Davis, 2024). President Trump supports this agenda. During a campaign rally in St. Cloud, Minnesota last year, he claimed he would undo the ban within 10 minutes in office. He continued,

“I pledge to Minnesota miners that when I'm reelected, I will reverse the Biden-Harris attack on your way of life, and we will turn the Iron Range into a mineral powerhouse like never before” (Trump, 2024 cited in MPR News, 2024).

In alignment with his ideology, Trump signed an Executive Order on March 20th which prioritizes resource extraction as the primary use of public land (Trump, 2025b). The reversal of the mining ban not only threatens the ecological integrity of the BWCA but also undermines the co-stewardship principles established by the Memorandum of Understanding

(United States Forest Service, 2023), jeopardizing the recognition of Indigenous land rights and stewardship. This executive order reflects broader trends of abrupt policy changes, such as withdrawing from the Paris Agreement or declaring a “national energy emergency” to accelerate domestic oil and gas extraction (Walling, 2025). His “drill, baby, drill” (Trump, 2025a) agenda asserts that the Endangered Species Act cannot impede energy development, raising concerns about the erosion of procedural safeguards and environmental protections (Walling, 2025). Nationwide, changes are happening quickly and without proper procedure.

This case is continuously evolving. On May 7th, the Reconciliation Recommendations of the House Committee on Natural Resources (2025) were released, suggesting budget additions with enormous environmental consequences, one of which forces the reinstatement of Twin Metal’s mineral lease without public comment. This is particularly concerning when viewed through a procedural equity lens, which values the accessibility of information and involvement of the public in decisions concerning natural resource management (Malin, Ryder, & Lara, 2019).

1.3 Positionality

I am a direct descendent of some of the first Norwegian settlers of what is now known as Castle Danger, Minnesota, along the north shore of Lake Superior. My ancestors may very well have engaged in violence with the Indigenous community they met, contributing to the erasure I investigate. In addition to this, I grew up visiting natural spaces across the country with little to no knowledge of the original stewards or the true extent of the colonial horrors they endure. Instead, I looked up to conservation figures like John Muir, who assisted in the construction of the settler-colonial concept of Wilderness (Brune, 2020).

Because of my background, I approach this research reflexively, with an awareness of the inherent injustice embedded in environmentalism. While I strive to analyze this topic critically, I acknowledge this paper is shaped by the privileges of my life. This paper may not fully capture certain diverse perspectives, particularly Indigenous voices, who are central to this discussion. I aim to be critical to the complexities of environmentalism and erasure while untangling conservation from settler-colonial narratives.

1.4 Structure

This paper begins with a brief history of the Boundary Waters to set the context of the research and position it within broader development discourse. Patterns within public land debates, specifically the intersection of conservation, recreation, and First Nation land claims, are discussed. The implications of extractive industries are reviewed to better understand the circumstances of this case. Chapter three explores previous literature concerning the social construction of *wilderness* as an agent of colonialism, the framing of tourism destinations, and frames used in broader conservation movements to situate this research. Post-colonialism and framing theory are introduced as theoretical frameworks which guide the analysis in chapter four. The methodology is reviewed in chapter five, detailing and motivating the procedure for analysis. Chapter six is a discourse analysis focused on the first part of the research question, concerning the presentation of the Boundary Waters. The discussion in chapter seven uses the observed frames to answer the second piece of the question, regarding the discernable instances of Indigenous erasure. The paper concludes by summarizing key findings and suggesting room for future research.

2. Background

This chapter sets a backdrop for this research by recounting the colonial history that led to the Boundary Waters as we know it today. I explain the circumstances of similar land use debates, particularly concerning public land in the U.S., and provide an overview of the present Twin Metal Mining controversy.

2.1 Historical Context of the Boundary Lakes Region

The Anishinaabe have occupied the region now called the Great Lakes for centuries (Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, n.d.). European settlers, called voyageurs, crossed the Great Lakes by boat and put down roots in what is now known as northeast Minnesota (Condon, 2022). They participated in the local fur trade controlled by Indigenous communities until they were prompted by greed for control, and settlers engaged in violent conflict with the Indigenous community (Cochrane, 2018, cited in Hilgren, 2021). The Chippewa were forced to sign a number of treaties because of “intense pressure and manipulation by the U.S.

government” (Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, n.d.). Under the guise of protection, the treaties were designed to cede a considerable share of their land to the United States government. This left them with parcels of their ancestral land, now known as the Fond du Lac, Grand Portage, and Bois Fort Reservations, and little control over critical resources (Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, n.d.). The territory now known as the Boundary Waters was relinquished with the 1854 Treaty. The treaty permits them to hunt, fish, trap, and gather resources on their ceded land, however these rights were not always respected (Thompson, 2017). The Dawes Act of 1887 dismantled Chippewa communal landholdings and effectively weakened their social fabric; thus began decades of forced assimilation, deliberately eroding their cultural identity (Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, n.d.). Over a century later, the US government has yet to acknowledge the genocide of Indigenous people, and settlers continue to benefit from the rich land and knowledge that was stolen (Blue, 2011).

While they were forced off communally held land into tribal boardings and mission schools, the economic opportunities of tourism flourished on their ceded land (Thompson, 2017). The region became a National Wilderness area in 1964, later refined by Jimmy Carter, who established the 440,000-hectare Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (Humphrey, 1964; Oberstar, 1979). These pieces of legislation officially classified the area as a peopleless place, set aside to preserve a pure and natural place (Humphrey, 1964; Oberstar, 1979). Today, visitors flock to the area for outdoor recreation, which Plummer (2009, p.1) defines as “voluntary participation in free-time activity that occurs in the outdoors and embraces the interaction of people with the natural environment”.

Yet, while tourism and conservation grew, Indigenous rights remained in contention. It was not until the 1970s, when a series of highly publicized court cases reasserted Indigenous treaty rights Nationwide (Thompson, 2017). This affirmed their right to self-govern how they hunt, fish, and gather on ancestral land, exempt from state regulations (Thompson, 2017). Still, only about 20% of the territory ceded in the 1854 treaty is actually accessible to them today (Deschampe, 2023, cited in Friedrichs, 2023).

2.2 Settler-Colonial Land Conflicts

It is common for white outdoor recreators to prioritize the preservation of public land for their recreational use, while simultaneously overlooking the historical and ongoing

significance of Indigenous ownership (Reid-Hresko & Warren, 2021). While this perspective may value environmental conservation, it also neglects the deep connection that Indigenous communities have with the land. According to Boggs (2017, p.177), disagreements that pit outdoor enthusiasts' desires against Indigenous "cultural and spiritual survival" are growing more frequent.

The framing of wilderness as a recreational space is deeply rooted in settler-colonial ideology (Ho & Chang, 2022). During the founding of what is now known as the United States, *wilderness* was seen as a national asset, superior to that of the rest of the world (Nash, 2014, p.67-68). Nash (2014, p.146) claims the *American wilderness* was a formidable influence on the United States national character, perhaps reinforcing a rugged, independent, American identity. The notion of wilderness as a thing to be experienced, explored, and protected in its pure state is perpetuated in the outdoor recreation community (Whitson, 2020).

This behavior extends to other post-colonial states, exemplified by the decades long struggle to end climbing on Uluru, which was ultimately banned due to its sacred significance to Aboriginal Australians (Barns, 2011; Whittington & Waterton, 2021). A similar conflict arose in America regarding climbing access on Devil's Tower, a site many tribes consider as the origin of life. While the climbing community have valued the tower for its high-profile routes, Indigenous communities regularly use the land to gather culturally significant plants and host ceremonies (Dustin et al., 2002). After years of dialogue, a voluntary ban to curve climbs during the month of June, when ceremonies are most common, was initiated by the National Park Service, and now respected by most climbers who visit the Park (Dustin et al., 2002). These cases highlight the persistent settler-colonial attitude embedded in outdoor recreation, where exploration and leisure often take precedence over Indigenous sovereignty.

The controversy surrounding Bears Ears National Monument provides a more recent example of the tensions between First Nation land rights, outdoor recreation, resource extraction, and conservation narratives. Designated under the Antiquities Act in 2015, Bears Ears was protected through Indigenous-led activism, however it faced immediate threats of reduction under the Trump administration (Yanito, 2025). While the five tribes of the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition fought to preserve sacred sites and culturally significant plants, Trump drastically shrank it through an Executive Order for the profitability of oil development (Yanito, 2025). In response, Patagonia launched a highly publicized campaign declaring "The

President Stole your Public Land” (Patagonia, 2017 cited in Whitson, 2020). Quickly joined by other popular outdoor brands, it became a well-known public land conflict among the outdoor recreation community. However, the conversation had shifted from Indigenous land management to a discussion on outdoor recreation access (Whitson, 2020). This pattern reflects a broader trend in American public land debates where environmental protections often privilege tourism and the outdoor recreation industry over First Nation interests (Whitson, 2020).

The Boundary Waters is another contested place. The 1854 treaty grants Chippewa people the right to hunt, fish, trap, and gather within the Border Lakes region (Thompson, 2017). Even so, Indigenous activity is limited by the tourism industry. This is evident in *U.S. v. Gotchnik* (2000) where four Boise Forte tribal members faced opposition from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources over their use of motors for commercial fishing in the Wilderness area. The ruling favored preserving the tourist experience of *wilderness*, a place of solitude and quiet (Whitson, 2020). Hilgren (2021, p.36) notes, “Ultimately, the decision functioned to enforce the settlers’ historical (silent) understanding of Ojibwe participation in the Boundary Waters soundscape, further erasing their presence”.

While Save the Boundary Waters acknowledges the original stewards of the land on their website (Save the Boundary Waters, n.d.), their messaging seems to exclude many mentions of the land as a cultural key to the survival of the Anishinaabe. The cultural ties between Indigenous people and their territory must be recognized and respected in conservation efforts. Decolonization cannot be used as a metaphor (Tuck & Wayne, 2021).

2.3 Extractive Industries

Often, the framing of resource extraction in rural areas is presented as an economic opportunity (Malin et al. 2019). Despite this, once operational, surrounding areas may struggle with long-term structural injustice, including environmental degradation and economic instability (Malin et al. 2019). Environmental inequalities are systemic and persist through policies that favor industrial development, often disregarding harmful consequences to local ecosystems and communities (Mohai et al. 2009). Access to clean water is a particularly concerning issue in the United States (Mueller & Gasteyer, 2021). Disparities are linked to race, income, education, and rurality, among others (Mohai et al. 2009). Indigenous

populations are especially vulnerable to pollution from extractive industries, with some Minnesota Tribal communities already presenting high mercury exposure from industrial extraction (Doll, 2022; Leonard et al. 2023). This is a broader international problem, evident in movements concerning the safety of First Nation water sources (Leonard et al. 2023; Norman, 2017).

In Minnesota, culturally important resources, such as moose and wild rice, face growing threats from both climate change and industrial development (Marks-Marino, 2019). A recent study on Birch Lake (a neighboring lake to the Wilderness area) found pollutants from a previous mining site has already impacting the harvest of wild rice (2023 Impact Report, 2023, p.15). The proposed Twin Metals mine, backed by Chilean company Antofagasta, has fueled heated debate. Some politicians argue extracting mineral resources domestically would make America more self-sufficient (Stauber, 2025). However, this argument appears to be contradictory, as the mining company itself is South American and has an existing contract to export the minerals mined to China (Lien, 2025).

3. Literature Review

This chapter will cover key theoretical sources into each subsection to ground this study within current research, constructing a foundation that will guide the thesis (Punch, 2013, p.154). Section one focuses on the social construction of wilderness by settlers, and how it has shifted meanings throughout time and perspectives, to gain a holistic perspective. Given that the Boundary Waters is the most visited Wilderness area in the United States with a core visiting base coming for leisure activities (Explore Minnesota, 2025), section two concentrates on how public land is framed, especially in the context of tourist destinations and places for outdoor recreation. Section three focuses on framing in Western conservation movements to understand how advocates shape public perception. This will contextualize how Save the Boundary Waters presents the land, and whether they reinforce or challenge dominant environmental narratives.

3.1 Framing Wilderness

The US Wilderness Act of 1964 defines Wilderness as a place “where man himself is a visitor who does not remain”. To this day, the Department of the Interior upholds that Wilderness Areas as “places untamed by humans” (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2023a). Defining it this way erases the original stewards of this land since time immemorial (Shultis & Heffner, 2016). Several researchers establish a framework in the connection between the concept of wilderness and settler colonialism in their research (Barnes, 2011; Boggs, 2017; Ho & Chang, 2021; Reid-Hresko & Warren, 2021; Walter, 2023; Whitson, 2020). Many maintain this connection originates from the *Doctrine of Discovery*, most specifically the concept *Terra Nullius*, which validates conquest of territory found *unoccupied* (Hendlin, 2014; Miller, 2019; Whitson, 2020).

Ho and Chang (2021) discuss the danger in this construction of wilderness. By neglecting the legacy of colonialism and the lasting consequences of Indigenous genocide, portraying wilderness as a place devoid of humans has an impact on how people understand the outdoors today. Other scholars claim the outdoor recreation industry perpetuates this narrative through Recreational Colonialism (Carter & Rose, 2024; Reid-Hresko & Warren, 2021). Recreational Colonialism explains the process in which Indigenous people are excluded from recreation activities while settlers simultaneously frame the wilderness as politically neutral and accessible to all (Reid-Hresko & Warren, 2021; Whitson, 2020). The intentional exclusion of Indigenous presence on public land was common practice until more recently (Andersson, 2024, p.201; Berkes, 2004; Boggs, 2017; Walter, 2023). Several popular early conservationists idealized a ‘pure wilderness’, but perhaps the best example of this is John Muir, otherwise known as the Father of the National Parks (Merchant, 2003; Whitson, 2020). The colonial ideals that upheld his writing led to the violent removal of First Nation communities in the Sierra Nevada and beyond (Merchant, 2003; Sandlos, 2014, p.134; Whitson, 2020). He and other Christian environmentalists equate the idea of a *pure wilderness* as a spiritual symbol; either as an extension of god’s creation, or as an example of “the moral chaos of the unregenerate” (Jeanrenaud, 2002; Nash, 2014, p.3). This reflects the generally pervasive Christian influence that underlies both historical and contemporary U.S. policies and ideologies (Swanson, 2020). From Manifest Destiny to the Space Race, the United States has used Christianity to justify its expansion (Swanson, 2020), inherently impacting how Americans understand wilderness and conservation today.

The construction of wilderness by past American environmentalists believes human interference in nature disrupts its pure divine character, thereby opposing development in these spaces (Nash, 2014, p.126). Comparisons like these draw a binary between nature and society, human and non-human, spoiled and unspoiled, ultimately framing human presence as inherently disruptive to nature (Nash, 2014, p.97; Shultis & Heffner, 2016). On the contrary, studies have found human intervention in the Boundary Waters and other acclaimed *wild* places to be beneficial for fire mitigation and biodiversity (Huffman, 2013; Larson et al. 2021; Phillips, 1998). Nonetheless, settler conservationists erased any mention of Indigenous stewardship till a fairly recent shift in discourse (Shultis & Heffner, 2016).

3.2 Framing Public Land

Public land's very existence is reinforced by the construction of wilderness and the settler colonial mindset of white tourists visiting such a place (Gómez-Pompa & Kaus, 1992; Whitson, 2020). Tourism is an ever-expanding industry, now including subcategories like nature-based tourism, eco-tourism, and adventure tourism (Lund, 2013; Stamou & Paraskevopoulos, 2006). When nature is deemed picturesque by visitors, it is given a social frame which Urry (1990, p.20) describes as the 'romantic tourist gaze'. This packages landscapes as a commodity, an idea immortalized through landscape art and photography (Bell, 1993). Previous research by Sontag (1977, p.3) highlights how photographs focus our eyes on what is important, similar to the mechanisms of frames. Photographs and depictions of landscapes that omit people serve to legitimize imperialist projects, as if the land has always been empty, therefore up for grabs (Bell, 1993; Pratt, 2003, p.53). Today, scenic photographs make up a major part of advertising, which Whitson (2020) argues can serve to perpetuate the settler-colonial idea of exploration.

In the United States, public land includes Parks, Forests, Monuments and Wilderness Areas, among others, in federal and state designations (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2023a). They are often used for leisure activities like hiking, fishing, skiing, and other outdoor sports, with Nash (2014, p.168) referring to National Parks as "public playgrounds". In an annual report released by the Outdoor Industry Association (2024 Outdoor Participation Trends Report: Executive Summary, 2024), white recreationalists accounted for 74% of participants in outdoor leisure activities, an overwhelming majority. Many researchers highlight the

feeling of collective ownership among white explorers in their spaces of outdoor recreation (Carter & Rose, 2024; Ho & Chang, 2021; Reid-Hresko & Warren, 2021; Whitson, 2020; Whitson, 2021). Along with this feeling of ownership, there is an underlying presumption of equal access to such spaces. This assumption is proven incorrect, rather, rhetorical exclusion is embedded (Boggs, 2017; Ho & Chang, 2021). Reid-Hresko and Warren (2021) conducted a study on the political aspects of mountain biking from the perspective of bikers in Squamish, British Columbia and found most participants are white athletes who minimize the political significance of where they engage in outdoor sports. However, given the violence Indigenous people across North America have endured through its dispossession, recreating on stolen land has political implications.

Rather than framing ancestral land as a place of universal ownership, an alternative view could be cultural landscapes. Rössler (2006, p.334) describes cultural landscapes as being “a symbol of the growing recognition of the fundamental links between local communities and their heritage, humankind and its natural environment”. Cultural landscapes acknowledge unique land management stewardship, breaking the traditional association of an untouched wilderness (Shultis & Heffner, 2016). The term is widely used in the designation of several UNESCO world heritage sites (Taylor & Lennon, 2010), demonstrating its accessibility for use in tourism.

3.3 Framing in Western Environmentalism

Social movement organizations (SMO) use strategic language and imagery to shape public perception of issues to strengthen support (Benford & Snow, 2000). This process of framing, a concept further examined in chapter four, is an important aspect to conservation efforts as the narratives environmental organizations construct determines how environmental issues are interpreted (Macnaghten & Urry, 1999, p.95). Environmental conservation is defined generally by Ibanga (2023) as actions aimed to protect habitats from human harm, involving managing, preserving, protecting, or restoring natural ecosystems. Frames vary depending on the context (Benford & Snow, 2000). For example, American conservation efforts occasionally use a binding moral frame, tied to nationalist ideals, to activate conservatives support for environmental efforts (Wolsko et al. 2016). This frame portrays environmental protection as “a matter of obeying authority, defending the purity of nature, and

demonstrating one's patriotism to the United States” (Wolsko et al. 2016, p.7). However, the affectability of this frame is contended between researchers (Kim et al. 2023).

Environmental issues are understood through deep cultural frameworks based upon narratives, emotions and morals (Farrell, 2015, p.24). These determine whether a space is given value, thereby worthy of protection (Farrell, 2015, p.239). Understanding the identity ties to place are useful to collective action against development (Kreye et al. 2017), especially when people feel emotional connection to the land (Farrell, 2015, p.3). Some argue that an ‘ethical viewpoint’, which emphasizes conservation for the sake of future generations, among other things, is a prominent reason for individuals to want to protect environments (Ibanga, 2023; Roser & Seidel, 2017, p. 75). The aesthetic standard of beauty in nature is another major driver for environmental protection, and impacts several aspects of conservation, such as which parts, when, and how it is preserved (Ibanga, 2023, pp.14-15, 21; Kojola, 2020). Diagnostic frames, which diagnose the problem, are developed based on what is likely to mobilize individuals (Benford & Snow, 1988), making these important ideas to keep in mind throughout analysis. Diagnostic framing for protecting public land tends to separate wilderness or nature from human environments (Shultis & Heffner, 2016). This distinction alienates meaningful engagement in management practices of Indigenous communities (Shultis & Heffner, 2016), who often yield successful results politically, socio-culturally, and ecologically in conservation efforts (Tran et al. 2020).

Nelson (2018, p. 256) discusses the strong correlation between successful Indigenous land management strategies and their cultural ties to the land. Over 25% of the world’s land surface is managed or subject to tenure rights by Indigenous Peoples, who account for less than 5% of the world’s population (Garnett et al. 2018). This, and their consistent resilience to systemic oppression, has led them to become key leaders in climate justice (Norman, 2017). Collaborative land management agreements between governments and First Nation stewards have become more frequent and are expected to provide substantial advantages for conservation (Garnett et al. 2018). However, critics of the practice view it as a symbolic gesture, where traditional ecological knowledge is only meant to *supplement* Western science for informed environmental management (Sandlos, 2014, p.146). Nonetheless, achieving conservation goals requires both the recognition of Indigenous stewardship and benefit sharing (Garnett et al. 2018).

3.3 Framing in Minnesota Conservation

Early protection efforts in the Boundary Waters are exemplified by Sigurd Olson, a popular conservationist figure in Minnesota (Hilgren, 2021). In his writing, he commemorates the ‘natural silence’ found in the Wilderness, described as “the hum of millions of insects”, among other animal sounds (Olson, 1956, p.130). Yet this ‘natural silence’ is in no way natural. Hilgren (2021), argues this presentation of the soundscape excludes the sounds from Indigenous people, who were violently removed from the area, therefore serving to erase their existence. In addition to this, he glorified voyageurs who traversed the area, while ignoring the original stewards who created the very trade routes they navigated (Hilgren, 2021). This is embedded in his writing when he states those who traverse rapids can hear “all the voyageurs of the past join the rapids in their shouting” (Olson, 1956, p.80).

Kojola (2020) conducted an ethnographic case study on the sense of place for Wilderness-edge communities in Northeastern Minnesota, interviewing both those who opposed the Twin Metals mine and those who supported its development. It is found that support is garnered by presenting “an emotional threat to a cherished place” (Kojola, 2020, p.690). Through interviews, different cultural meanings to the same place, the Boundary Waters, are found for the opposition and supporters. Meanings for those who support the mine view the BWCA as their backyard and believe the mine would not damage the environment, rather, that it would “bring the good life” (Kojola, 2020, p.690). They view environmentalists as an elitist threat to their identity, values, and procedural equity. Meanings for those who opposed the mine were emotional, constructed based upon recreational memories, value in ecology, and an appreciation of aesthetics. This tension shows how the construction of place is shaped by embedded cultural meanings. Meanings of place are a key aspect of power (Kojola, 2020), showing the importance of understanding how the Boundary Waters is framed.

3.4 Research Gap

Given it is a pivotal time in both American politics and the health of the global climate, understanding the framing processes used in on-going conservation movements has never been more critical. Scholars such as Whitson (2020) and Hilgen (2021) have critically discussed the embedded nature of settler-colonial recreation presented in the Boundary Waters, and Kojola (2020) has explored aspects of framing in the current mining debate.

However, how Save the Boundary Waters' diagnostic framing impacts Indigenous erasure remains unexamined. This study seeks to address that gap by contributing to a deeper understanding of how the space is framed for protection and the broader implications for Indigenous sovereignty.

4. Theoretical Framework

This chapter explains the theoretical frameworks which serve to guide this research, emphasizing the affectability of both postcolonial theory and framing theory. Postcolonial theory is applied to examine a critical view on the historically imperialist nature of environmental campaigns. This approach encourages challenging dominant narratives, which will allow for discussions about the inherent complexities of conservation, ultimately discussing the possibility of exclusion and erasure for Indigenous communities. As this thesis aims to unravel frames hidden in Save the Boundary Waters' campaigns, framing theory will complement the critical postcolonial analysis to analyze and understand their presentation of why the Boundary Waters is worth saving.

4.1 Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory provides a broad but critical lens for examining the persistent legacy of colonialism. It emphasizes the reality of ongoing colonial power dynamics through historical violence and structural inequalities (Dillon, 2014, p.397). The theory was founded by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1979), which describes analysis on power dynamics and the embeddedness of colonialism, focusing on imperialist power imbued in language. This is evident in the normalized distinguishment of the Orient as inferior to Western powers, through portraying the Orient as 'Other' (Said, 1979, p.7).

Othring is a powerful frame, pervasive through societal inequalities based on race, nationality, and other identity markers (Said, 1979, p.233). It establishes and maintains a *natural* hierarchy of society, where the other is inherently "backward", making this frame difficult to change (Said, 1979, p.7). These colonial narratives adapt over time, as Gilroy (1991, p.7) states: "Racism does not ... move tidily and unchanged through history. It

assumes new forms and articulates new antagonisms in different situations.” Othering is continuously reinforced through various facets of society, such as in education, policy, media and social norms (Dillon, 2014, p.402; Said, 1979, pp.12, 26). A clear example of contemporary othering is the tendency of nations to refer to Indigenous population with the inference of ownership, such as statements like *our* Indigenous People (Queen’s University, n.d.).

Said (1979, p.5) argues research conducted in post-colonial settings must account for residual power imbalances from colonial history. In conservation, the lingering influence of the colonial gaze is evident in the dominant framing of wilderness, one that values ‘purity’ and erases Indigenous presence (Ho & Chang, 2021). As this research focuses on an area with a deep history of Indigenous removal and perpetual erasure, a post-colonial framework must be applied. For this thesis, postcolonial theory supports a critical analysis of systemic exclusion, complemented by framing theory’s ability to uncover narratives of *wilderness* in the Boundary Waters.

4.2 Framing Theory

Goffman (1974) is accredited for establishing frame analysis. Frames are essential for individuals to interpret social interactions, events, and the world at large and are constructed for people to understand issues, guide expectations and shape their responses (Goffman, 1974, p.21). Entman (1993) explains dominant frames as the emphasized aspects of reality intentionally chosen by institutions to define problems, typically through established cultural values. Simultaneously, dominant frames interpret causes, encourage specific moral judgements, before typically offering justified solutions (Entman, 1993). The dominant frame is constructed through content distribution (Entman, 1993). Though it may not universally impact the receiving audience, Entman (1993) claims the frames have a common effect on a high percentage.

Benford and Snow (2000) describe frames are crucial to understanding social movements. They expand framing analysis to SMO by defining collective action frames as “action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a SMO” (Benford & Snow, 2000, p.614). They find collective action frames consist of three framing tasks:

1. Diagnostic framing establishes the problem and attributions.
2. Prognostic framing proposes solutions and suggests strategies to make change.
3. Motivational framing strives to activate and engage individuals to join the movement.

This paper utilizes diagnostic framing analysis to determine the active frames of the BWCA as presented by the Save the Boundary Waters. The organization, with a self-described outreach to millions of people, holds a powerful position in the framing of the Boundary Waters and the proposed Twin Metals mine (2022 Impact Report, 2022, p.8). Framing theory suggests that Save the Boundary Waters dominates the narrative by being the most influential opposition group in the discussion (Benford & Snow, 2000). Inherently, this suggests a marginalization of Indigenous Peoples involved in the campaign.

4.3 Complementing Theories

From a critical lens, contemporary conservation is deeply shaped by colonial legacies, with framing theory providing an analysis of how these legacies are perpetuated in current issues. One example is the framing of wilderness as untouched, which coincidentally facilitates indigenous erasure nationwide (Ho & Chang, 2021). This is also evident in chapter three, where it was discussed that peopleless depictions of landscapes legitimizing the seizure of ‘empty’ land (Bell, 1993; Pratt, 2003, p.53). Postcolonial theory emphasizes the embedded nature of imperialism in all facets of power in postcolonial societies, making it particularly relevant to this examination of the dominant environmental organization’s diagnostic framing. By combining a critique of postcolonialism with frame analysis, this framework will provide a critical interpretation to analyzing Save the Boundary Waters’ efforts and assist in a deeper understanding of the cultural impact of these frames.

5. Methodology

This chapter presents methodological choices made for this case study to answer the question of how the Boundary Waters are framed by environmental activists and whether it follows the path of dominant conservation narratives to contribute to Indigenous erasure. It begins with

a research design, then motivates the data collected and how it is analyzed. The scope of the study is discussed, as well as the delimitations, limitations and ethical considerations for conducting this frame analysis. Finally, the generalizability of the thesis is considered.

5.1 Research Design

This research is an intrinsic case study using discourse analysis to examine the framing of the BWCA from the presentation of Save the Boundary Waters. Discourse analysis is chosen to examine the underlying ideologies embodied in content distributed by the organization (Punch, 2013, p.292). Data from firsthand sources are extracted into codes to identify common themes (Thomas, 2006). Primary frames emerge from observed ideas and are justified in the text (Tonkiss, 2012, pp.412-413). Intersections between frames are addressed, as well as an analysis of what is featured in the data and what is not. The diagnostic frames are explored to understand how Save the Boundary Waters presents the Wilderness area as a space worthy of protection. These frames are then taken into consideration to discuss the potential implications of Indigenous erasure.

The proposed Twin Metals mine is presented differently by the variety of stakeholders involved in the debate. Although the proposal of this mine has international implications, especially for the entire Superior-Quetico region, the United States will be the focus of this study given recent political developments. Save the Boundary Waters is chosen as it is the most active SMO framing the movement for protection (2022 Impact Report, 2022, p.8). The 2024 U.S. Presidential election will be used as a contextual anchor for this study as the reelection of the Trump administration serves as a catalyst for the movement. Data is analyzed with framing analysis tools developed by previous researchers (Uggla & Olausson, 2013) and presented in the analysis.

5.2 Data Collection

The data I collect is from Save the Boundary Waters, whose extensive outreach establishes authority on the topic. Their content will provide a representative view on frames for the Boundary Waters within the context of environmental protections. The data is first sourced from their available annual Impact Reports (2021; 2022; 2023; 2024), to understand their long-term institutional presentation of the BWCA. To supplement, recent posts from both

their Blog and Facebook page will be studied and coded to understand their latest strategic narrative of the Wilderness area (Save the Boundary Waters Blog, 2025; Save the Boundary Waters Facebook, 2025). Their social media content is often cross posted across different platforms, however, a focus on their Facebook account is chosen because it is the account with the largest outreach, with over 90K followers (Save the Boundary Waters Facebook, 2025). The reviewed data from their Blog and Facebook page is consolidated, organized, and presented in the Appendix, so that individual posts may be retrieved.

Supplementary posts will be reviewed from November 5th, 2024, to May 12th, 2025, with the election marking a change in the trajectory of the case. Harris-Waltz was endorsed by The Boundary Waters Action Fund and is associated with an administration that instituted the ban on sulfide-ore copper mining in 2023 (London, 2024). Meanwhile, Trump-Vance proposed reopening the Superior National Forest to mining and laid out a plan to do so in Project 2025 (MPR News, 2024). Save the Boundary Waters themselves remark “the stakes have never been higher” (Save the Boundary Waters Blog, 2025, B1). The time range includes a total of 28 blog posts from which to collect data. Material collected from the 104 analyzed Facebook posts includes shared content created by others, typically ranging from news articles to blog posts written by other organizing bodies. The combination of data from the Impact Reports and their more recent distributed content provides an interpretation of the deep-rooted frames they employ.

5.3 Data Analysis

Discourse Analysis investigates the construction of social reality through language, and is often more abstract than transparent (Tonkiss, 2012, pp.405-406). To detangle the discourse, key themes relating to their associating of the land will be abstracted from the data and interpreted through an inductive coding strategy. This means codes will be developed as I collect and analyze data (Punch, 2013, p.256). Data is organized by grouping material into sets of codes. These codes are then associated with frames. It is necessary to acknowledge that frames are often interconnected, so codes will likely apply to multiple frames (Uggla & Olausson, 2013). An analytical strategy developed by Uggla and Olausson (2013) is used to identify and analyze important frames. Prominence of information determines salient topics, so headlines and bolded text is studied attentively. Information that is repeatedly stressed in the content through slogans, imagery, or distinctions and contrasts is also given special

attention. In addition to this, information which is presented as linked to culturally meaningful symbols is noted. These analytical tools are presented with relating material throughout the analysis, ensuring reliable results (Uggla & Olausson, 2013).

5.4 Delimitations

This study focuses on diagnostic framing within the Save the Boundary Waters research because the investigation on Indigenous erasure within the movement's presentation of the Wilderness area remains unexplored. While a complete investigation into the three framing tasks of Benford & Snow's (2000) collective action frame analysis is out of the scope of this study, the diagnosis framing is explored as it builds the foundation toward further research into prognosis and motivation framing.

5.5 Limitations

Research on framing does come with certain limitations. The construction and influence of frames are inherently nuanced (Entman, 1993), and critics argue that the process of identifying and categorizing frames is supported by little guidance from Framing Theory (Borah, 2011). To address this concern, the study uses an inductive coding analysis. This creates a research design where preconceptions to this topic are not imposed upon the data, rather, codes materialize through the analytical strategy (Tonkiss, 2012, p.412). I acknowledge that by accessing my data through online sources, information may be deleted or edited at any time, unbeknown to me. There is a chance this study may miss pieces of previous material which may have impacted public perception to the land differently, though this is generally out of my control.

5.6 Ethical Considerations

Arguably, the act of deconstructing content framing may, at times, be counterproductive, as excessive scrutiny or regulation of distributed content could be interpreted as policing language and limiting free speech. This framing analysis inevitably dissects the narrative presented by Save the Boundary Waters, though it does not seek to regulate the discourse itself. The analysis respects diverse viewpoints and does not make moral judgments on content.

5.7 Generalizability

Generalization is not the objective in this study given the specificity of the issue; however, resource extraction on public land is a pertinent dispute. This case can be linked to broader development discourse involving the intersections between resource extraction, Indigenous rights, conservation, and tourism. Previously mentioned examples of similar cases in the United States include Bears Ears National Monument and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, both currently facing highly publicized potential resource extraction projects (The Wilderness Society, 2019). This case attempts to contribute to broader discourse about public land conflicts.

6. Analysis

The name *Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness* itself presents the area as protected for the sake of canoeing, a leisure activity. The USFS reinforces this frame in its published description of the region:

“Because this area was set aside in 1926 to preserve its primitive character and made a part of the National Wilderness Preservation System in 1964, it allows visitors to canoe, portage and camp in the spirit of the French Voyageurs of 200 years ago” (U.S. Forest Service, 2013).

This statement contributes to the recreational frame while also glorifying the actions of the voyageurs who settled the area, erasing the historical displacement and continuous presence of the very people who established the canoe routes.

While the USFS may establish initial frames for the area, Save the Boundary Waters has a choice whether to reinforce or challenge this narrative in their own presentation of the area. The diagnostic framing of the land plays a crucial role in the public’s interpretation of the issue, influencing how individuals assess the mine’s potential impact and the significance of what is at stake. The way the land is presented directs attention and consequently guides prioritization towards certain aspects of the issue (Iyengar, 1996). Less prevalent narratives

may be overshadowed, which may limit diverse perspectives and potentially impact future policy.

This analysis examines various frames Save the Boundary Waters employs to describe the impact of the proposed Twin Metals mine on different aspects of the Wilderness area. These frames emphasize the purity of the Wilderness, the importance of the unique ecosystem, its value as a recreation hub, its symbolism as a national treasure, and its role as a place of deep cultural significance.

6.1 Pure Wilderness Frame

Evident in previous literature, the purity of wilderness has been romanticized by settler conservationists for generations (Andersson, 2024, p.201; Berkes, 2004; Boggs, 2017; Walter, 2023). However, this harmful narrative wipes out any trace of the First Nation stewards (Ho & Chang, 2021). This section will break down the material from Save the Boundary Waters which sustains this frame and follows the traditional narrative in environmentalism.

6.1.1 Unspoiled

Framing wilderness as pure is deeply rooted in American conservation (Merchant, 2003). In this research, it explains why some of the organization's content portrays the BWCA as a *truly natural wilderness*. This frame is prominent when the land is described as untouched, pristine, and pure. As discussed in the Literature Review, this description reinforces the settler colonial narrative of empty wilderness (Ho & Chang, 2021). This value laden language conflicts with the organization's published land acknowledgement, which recognizes "describing the Wilderness as "*untouched*" can feel like erasing the reality that people called this area home long before European colonization and Wilderness designation" (Save the Boundary Waters, n.d.). Still, references to the land as *untouched* can be found in a few data sources from the selected time frame. One is an article shared on their Facebook page, a piece published by the MN Daily (Aigner, 2025 cited in Save the Boundary Waters, 2025b, F9). Another is a part of an ad campaign they ran in 2022, discussed later in this chapter (2022 Impact Report, 2022, p.8). The third is a post shared from Minnesota House representative Betty McCollum (McCollum, 2025 cited in Save the Boundary Waters, 2025b, F7).

However, synonyms such as *pristine* and *unspoiled* are widely used, constructing a recurring frame of purity that needs protection (2024 Impact Report, 2024, p.3; Save the Boundary Waters, 2025a, B12).

Framing the Wilderness as pure is often used to emphasize the potential for devastation from run-off mining pollution. This is especially evident in figure 2, where the difference between clean and polluted is highlighted. This frame creates a binary of good and bad, natural and unnatural, unspoiled and spoiled. Another example is this distinction in their content is their research on the current sulfate pollution in Birch Lake, a body of water just outside the Wilderness boundary (2023 Impact Report, 2023, p.15). This pollution is a result of an inactive mining site, perhaps intended to set a precedent for mining in the area. They highlight the results of the research in the large heading “Birch Lake: Impaired” (2023 Impact Report, 2023, p.15), the most prominent text on the page. This draws a distinction between a lake already impacted by sulfate pollution and lakes in the Wilderness area, whose water is often described as “so pure you can literally drink it straight from the lake” (McCollum, 2025 cited in Save the Boundary Waters, 2025b, F7).

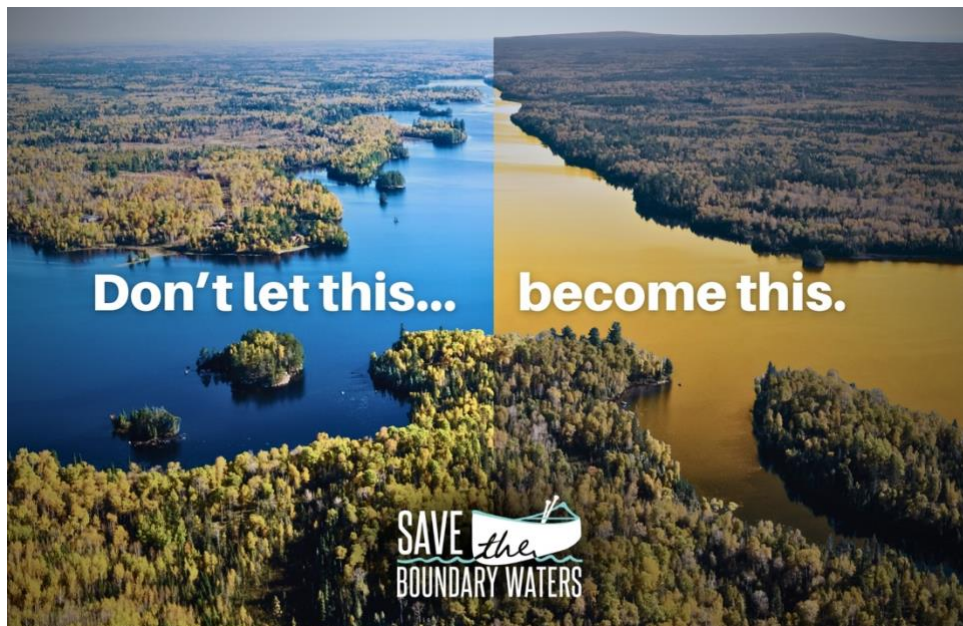


Figure 2 (Save the Boundary Waters, 2025b, F1)

The purity frame is also supported by the celebration of the BWCA’s designation as an International Dark Sky Sanctuary. According to Save the Boundary Waters, it is “one of only 20” in the entire world (Save the Boundary Waters, 2025b, F18). This classification is simply

because the area is unaffected by light pollution. The clean sky allows an effortless view of the Milky Way and Northern Lights and adds to the mystique of a pure Boundary Waters, “a true Wilderness area” (Save the Boundary Waters Blog, 2025a, B9). However, it is important to remember this area is not completely natural; it is only constructed to feel that way to visitors.

6.1.2 Undeveloped Land

The landscape may be considered pristine as it is seemingly free of modern infrastructure, apparent in the lack of roads, buildings, and businesses typical of developed areas. Yet, there is another kind of infrastructure established in the Boundary Waters. The area boasts approximately 2,000 kilometers of maintained canoe routes, traversing both water and portage trails. It holds over 2,000 designated campsites, each outfitted with its own latrine, fire pit featuring a cooking grate, and tent sites. Additionally, the approximate 325 kilometers of hiking trails, sporting Chippewa names like the Kekekabic Trail and the Powwow Trail, serve as evidence of human activity, both historic and contemporary (U.S. Forest Service, 2023). Of course, the history of land use extends beyond current recreation opportunities; the region also contains rock quarries dating back thousands of years (Wendt & Mulholland, 2013). This underscores previous research proving the persisting relationship between humans and the land (Larson et al. 2019; Larson et al. 2021). Nevertheless, conservation discourse has historically labeled people as exploiters of natural resources, spoiling landscapes in the process (Shultis & Heffner, 2016). Thus, peopleless landscapes are idolized, and the framing of *pure wilderness* continues.

The Leave No Trace organization is a global initiative that advocates for minimizing human impact on *wild places* by encouraging visitors to leave environments as they were found (U.S. Forest Service, 2023). Save the Boundary Waters promotes the campaign in multiple posts concerning responsible recreation (Save the Boundary Waters, 2025b, F5, F8). The initiative contributes to a pure framing of the BWCA by reinforcing the bounded system settlers have created for wilderness, where people are separated from nature. Save the Boundary Waters may be leveraging a purity frame to engage the tourists who seek an ‘authentic wilderness experience’, in turn encouraging them to recognize and advocate for the preservation of the border lake region. Even so, the purity frame follows the legacy of conservation ideals established by settlers, and risks perpetuating Indigenous erasure.

6.1.3 Sounds of Nature

The purity frame is also prevalent in a signature slogan of the organization, “Speak loudly for this quiet place” (Save the Boundary Waters, 2025b, F17). As specified by Hilgren (2021), labeling nature as quiet maintains the settler colonial legacy of wilderness, as it fails to acknowledge the forced removal of Indigenous communities, and therefore the removal of Indigenous sounds in the Boundary Waters. Hilgren (2021) states this type of eco-colonialism, one which idealized the sound of nature, was promoted by Sigurd Olson. His reverence to pure wilderness and voyageur settlers contributed to the erasure of Indigenous people by equating the Anishinaabe to a piece of the area’s natural history (Hilgren, 2021). As seen in Article F14 (Save the Boundary Waters, 2025b), Save the Boundary Waters follows in the footsteps of his conservation, where Save the Boundary Waters states “We honor his legacy by continuing the work to defend the Wilderness for future generations”. This statement indicates praise of Olson’s settler conservation ideals and implies an intention to carry on with them. Article B6 (Save the Boundary Waters, 2025a) shows another example of this continued colonial narrative, where the author states the Boundary Waters is “one of the few remaining “*naturally quiet*” places on the planet where you can experience what it feels like to be an explorer”. This portrayal not only glamorizes the notion of an untouched, silent wilderness, but also directly commends colonial explorers and implies visitors should strive to put themselves in their shoes.

6.2 Unique Ecosystem Frame

This section describes a frame in which the land is valued for its ecological characteristics. This includes the prominence of information about its biodiversity of endangered wildlife, its rare designation as a Dark Sky Sanctuary, and admiration of it as truly *special*. This frame is often presented in tandem with a purity framing, as the cleanliness of both the land and the water appears to be the foundation of this unique ecosystem.

6.2.1 Biodiversity and Climate Resiliency

The purity of the water is a repetitive idea for Save the Boundary Waters. They repeatedly describe the water as so clean that it doesn’t need filtration. It is relatively uncommon in the United States to find water “so pure paddlers often dip their cups straight into the lake and

drink” (Save the Boundary Waters, 2025a, B9). There are fewer and fewer areas where water can be consumed untreated. By repeating this idea, Save the Boundary Waters provides this ecosystem with a frame that is simultaneously unique and pure.

Other distinctive qualities of this ecosystem are consistently emphasized in the organization’s content. This is displayed either directly, through words like ‘*unique*’ and ‘*special*’, or indirectly, by referencing different dimensions of the ecosystem you cannot find in many other places (Save the Boundary Waters, 2025a, B1, B11). Lauded as “indescribable” (McCollum, 2025, cited in Save the Boundary Waters, 2025b, F7), Save the Boundary Waters creates a mythical and romanticized view of the area, which further idealizes the notion of a unique and pure Wilderness. This is exemplified in several pieces of their material. For one, it qualifies as one of twenty Dark Sky Sanctuaries in the world, one of the few places to experience an unabridged night sky (Save the Boundary Waters, 2025b, F18). This information, accompanied by photos of the Northern Lights or the Milky Way, is in several pieces of distributed content, notably including the first spread of pages when you open the 2023 Impact Report (p.1-2).

It is also evident the lakes, rivers, and wetlands provide essential conditions to support the diverse collection of plants and wildlife through frequent blanket statements about the area’s biodiversity, which is presented as a last hope to environmental problems. This is shown in Article B9 (Save the Boundary Waters, 2025a), where the ecosystem’s importance is emphasized to be a key habitat for both the Grey Wolf and Canadian Lynx, each of whom are endangered. In the 2022 Impact Report (p.27), Save the Boundary Waters presents the Boundary Waters as “essential” to fighting the global climate crisis, saying it is “one of the six most important regions in the lower 48 states [of the U.S.] critically necessary for adaptation, resilience, and biodiversity”. This idea is repeated in other pieces of material they release, further describing the area as a “climate stronghold” (Save the Boundary Waters, 2025a, B9), and further framing the area as one of the last hopes in the climate crisis and demonstrating the urgency of the debate. By presenting the Boundary Waters as integral to fighting global warming in the United States, the organization reinforces the remarkability of the ecosystem.

6.2.2 Aesthetics

Across the collected data, a recurring theme emerges in which aesthetic appeal is coupled with value. Save the Boundary Waters reinforces this connection by describing its beauty as unmatched, stating "the tranquility and sheer beauty of the boundary waters cannot be expressed with words" (2022 Impact Report, 2022, p.25). They also describe it as "a place where people can reconnect with nature and find peace in its pristine beauty" (Save the Boundary Waters, 2025a, B2). The emphasis on visual splendor paints a picture of serenity, evoked through descriptions of stargazing by the fire, loon calls echoing across the water, and lakes so still the forest is perfectly mirrored in their water. The idea that the region's worth lies in its beauty is reinforced by photos of sunsets over the water or canoes resting on shorelines. This aestheticized framing privileges areas deemed beautiful, which often produces successful outcomes in conservation efforts (Ibanga, 2023, p.15). Here, there is an inherent risk of the land's value being reduced to its visual appeal, where the photogenic landscape may be stripped of its deeper cultural significance.

6.2.3 Irreplicable Place

The vulnerability of the Boundary Water's 'pristine beauty' is a reoccurring concern, often referred to as fragile, vulnerable, and irreplaceable, with repeated warnings that "there are no second chances" (2024 Impact Report 2024, pp. 5, 16; Save the Boundary Waters, 2025a, B4, B10). This fragility emphasizes the ecological sensitivity of the environment to external threats, such as industrial development, while also reinforcing the binary of pristine vs. polluted. It emphasizes how special the space is, deeming it worthy of protection.

"Not this mine, not this place" is a recurring phrase used by both the campaign and other various public figures (Save the Boundary Waters, 2025b, F3, F6). The notion of the BWCA as a place too special to risk pollution is echoed by Tim Walz, the governor of Minnesota, in Article F20 (Save the Boundary Waters, 2025), and by Congresswoman Betty McCollum, who states "Some places are simply too precious to mine" (McCollum, 2025, cited in Save the Boundary Waters, 2025b, F7). Senator Tina Smith has stated she supports mining elsewhere, just not near the BWCA (Burcum, 2025, as cited in Save the Boundary Waters, 2025b, F16). The promotion of this frame by Minnesota's top state officials makes it salient, however, this presentation as *special* is vaguely and can be interpreted with more meanings than just because of the ecosystem.

This frame aligns with Fallon’s (2015, p.238) notion of a space “too special to drill”, in which moral boundaries inscribe meaning to sentimental spaces, resulting in protection for spaces with meaning while leaving unremarkable places open to industrial development. This idea of selective preservation further stresses the ecological sensitivity of the area, pronouncing not only a unique ecosystem frame, but a purity frame as well. Clean water is so often in the center of this conversation, and it is evident from their campaign that they expect it will be first thing poisoned by the mine if the project is to continue. Once the water is polluted, the damage will be “irreversible” (2024 Impact Report, 2024, p.13). They also claim that 20% of the freshwater in the National Forest system is located in the Superior National Forest and BWCA (Save the Boundary Waters, 2025a, B9). It is implied that once contaminated, the ecosystem will be tainted, consequently losing both its ecological significance and its critical role as a freshwater source for the country.

6.3 Recreational Frame

The recreational frame is already evident in the Wilderness area’s name. In the campaign to Save the Boundary Waters, it is shown in many images, usually focusing on canoeing or camping. Its appearance, both directly and indirectly, are discussed in this section.

6.3.1 Escape from Society

The Boundary Waters is framed as a refuge from the real world. Terms like tranquil, solitude, transformative, and enlightening appear throughout the data sources, constructing the area as a space for escape (2024 Impact Report 2024, pp. 3, 6, 10, 11). This is evident when trips to the region are described as “a chance to unplug” (Save the Boundary Waters, 2025b, F8). Photos of canoes on foggy waterways or perched on the lake shore, which suggest solitude and silence, are observed frequently (2023 Impact Report, 2023, p.3; 2024 Impact Report 2024, p22). One blog post goes as far as to state “everything the Boundary Waters represents” as “serenity, adventure, and hope for future generations” (Save the Boundary Waters, 2025a, B7). These depict the Wilderness as a retreat for leisure, reducing its significance as a cornerstone of Indigenous continuity to a destination. Its designation as a Dark Sky Sanctuary also contributes to this framing, further solidifying the perception of the

Boundary Waters as a *sanctuary* to escape urban light pollution (Save the Boundary Waters, 2025b, F18).

6.3.2 Leisure

Save the Boundary Waters frequently refers to the region as America's most visited Wilderness, applying a frame that stresses the area as designated for the enjoyment of visitors. Occasionally the phrase is used to emphasize the toxicity of the proposed industrial development, such as in Article B10: "We can't allow America's most toxic industry next to America's most visited Wilderness" (Save the Boundary Waters, 2025a). The repetition of this phrase, combined with the frequent use of "canoe country" (2024 Impact Report, 2024, p.17), strengthens the recreational frame already embedded in the Wilderness' name, emphasizing its appeal for outdoor leisure and tourism.

Many of the images within their Annual Reports or accompanying their blog and social media posts are of individuals engaging in leisure activities (2021 Impact Report, 2021, p. 16; 2024 Impact Report, 2024, pp.6, 21). It is clear canoeing and canoe camping is a central aspect of their campaign. Perhaps this is justified, as they claim the Boundary Waters holds the most commonly paddled waterways in the entire country (Paulsen, 2025, as cited in Save the Boundary Waters, 2025b, F21). This frame aligns with the federal name bestowed on the Wilderness area and is perpetuated in photos. This is shown below in figure 3, where three out of the five photos from a single Facebook post focus on canoeing and camping, while the remaining two photos promote the aesthetics of the Wilderness area. The constant repetition of photos like these, indicates a consistent reinforcement of a recreational frame, where protecting recreational opportunities is a primary reason to support their efforts.



Figure 3 (McCollum, 2025 cited in Save the Boundary Waters, 2025b, F7)

Tourist-centric experiences exemplify a trend in their conservation discourse that privileges acclaimed recreation opportunities. This theme is evident in the organization’s outreach efforts, which often align with the outdoor recreation community. For example, Save the Boundary Waters recently participated in Canoepedia, a canoe convention in Wisconsin, where representatives from the organization hosted lectures focusing on recreation topics (Save the Boundary Waters, 2025b, F10). Examples of this trend continue as the organization frequently co-hosts events with outdoor recreation industry stakeholders, such as the Backcountry Film Festival (Save the Boundary Waters, 2025b, F4). By associating their conservation outreach and funding efforts with outdoor sports, the organization reinforces a framing of environmental protection as an extension of recreational interests.

6.3.3 Outdoor Recreation Economy

The recreational frame is further reinforced in recurring statements about the success of the outdoor recreation industry in the region. The “growth and expansion of a thriving community and outdoor recreation economy” is explicitly shown as salient to their diagnostic framing in the 2022 Impact Report (p.26) and beyond. It is often noted in other content by stressing the reliance of the community on the Wilderness area’s leisure opportunities, repeatedly producing figures for employment and the economy (Save the Boundary Waters, 2025a, B12). There are more indirect mentions as well, such as consistently platforming outfitter voices (2022 Impact Report, 2022, pp. 15, 25). Through this, Save the Boundary Waters repeatedly positions the Wilderness’ value in its profitability as a space for recreation.

Arguably, the American outdoor recreation industry relies on free access to recreational opportunities on public land. Otherwise, where would people use their climbing shoes and tents? This is relevant considering major funding partners to Save the Boundary Waters are notably Patagonia, REI Co-op, and the North Face, among the 400+ other businesses (many connected to recreation) in their coalition (2023 Impact Report, 2023, p.27). It should come as no surprise that these brands have been criticized for promoting explorer mindsets in their marketing, in line with recreational colonialism (Whitson, 2020). Consequently, it makes sense that conservation efforts would align with recreation interests that perpetuate the notion of a wilderness to be ‘explored’.

6.4 American Legacy Frame

Save the Boundary Waters expresses the region is an important piece of America itself. They stress it is *America’s Wilderness* and a “vital part of Minnesota’s identity” (Save the Boundary Waters, 2025b, F11). Through this frame, a construction of the land as American soil is created, and the fight against industrial pollution becomes a threat to the entire country.

6.4.1 National Treasure

Save the Boundary Waters repeatedly refers to the Boundary Waters as a “national treasure” (Save the Boundary Waters, 2025b, F3). It is also frequently referenced as American heritage, constructing a narrative of collective ownership and a source of national pride (2024 Impact Report, 2024, p.11). Similarly, the organization occasionally swap ‘visited’ in ‘America’s most visited Wilderness’ for ‘most beloved’ or ‘most pristine’, reinforcing this sense of American ownership (2024 Impact Report, 2024, p.23; Save the Boundary Waters, 2025b, F22, F23). The repetition of these terms infer the United States procured exclusive stewardship of the region. The description of the Boundary Waters as an “American crown jewel” (2021 Impact Report, 2021, p.4), implies the space as a prized possession, claimed by the United States government. This negates the history of stewardship and the very nature of Indigenous sovereignty.

When viewed through a nationalist lens, this discourse aligns with the ideology of the American dream, suggesting the region was earned through hard work and perseverance, rather than through violence. Figure 4 strengthens this framing by visually linking their

conservation efforts to national identity, featuring an image of the American flag overlaid on a Boundary Waters landscape alongside the text “Thank you veterans for your service”. This imagery strengthens the portrayal that protecting the region is an extension of national duty. The consistent repetition of the statement ‘belongs to us all’ further positions the landscape as a piece of shared heritage for American citizens (Save the Boundary Waters, 2025a, B10, B11).



Figure 4 (Save the Boundary Waters, 2025b, F2)

6.4.2 The Land Under Threat

The rhetoric Save the Boundary Waters uses in their content echoes nationalist framing by presenting the land as a beloved national asset under threat. While the phrase “under threat” is often written directly, a sense of patriotic duty can be found in other phrases like: “join the fight”, “attacks on America’s favorite Wilderness”, or “fighting to keep it wild forever” (2021 Impact Report, 2021, p.19; Save the Boundary Waters, 2025a, B8). Given that Twin Metal’s parent company, Antofagasta, is a Chilean mining giant, these framing urges citizen to view the Boundary Water’s as American land struggling with conflict from international exploiters. The mine is explicitly presented as a foreign threat in several Articles (2024 Impact Report, 2024, pp.24-25; Save the Boundary Waters, 2025a, B8, B1; McCollum, 2025, cited in Save the Boundary Waters, 2025b, F7, F23), reinforcing the American land frame and activating a sense of patriotic duty to protect it.

6.4.3 Heritage for Future Generations

In 2022, Save the Boundary Waters launched the campaign *America's Wilderness*. The advertisements collected approximately 9.1 million impressions (2022 Impact Report, 2022, p.8). As exemplified in figure 5, advertisements for the campaign are aesthetically vintage, featuring black and white photos of mainstream American families canoeing, fishing, and

performing other leisure activities in the Boundary Waters.

The imagery reinforces a nostalgic ideal of the Wilderness as a space for recreation and national pride. The accompanying text solidifies both the American legacy and recreational framing, through the bolded prominence of “America’s Wilderness”, while simultaneously contributing to the pure wilderness frame with the descriptor “untouched”.

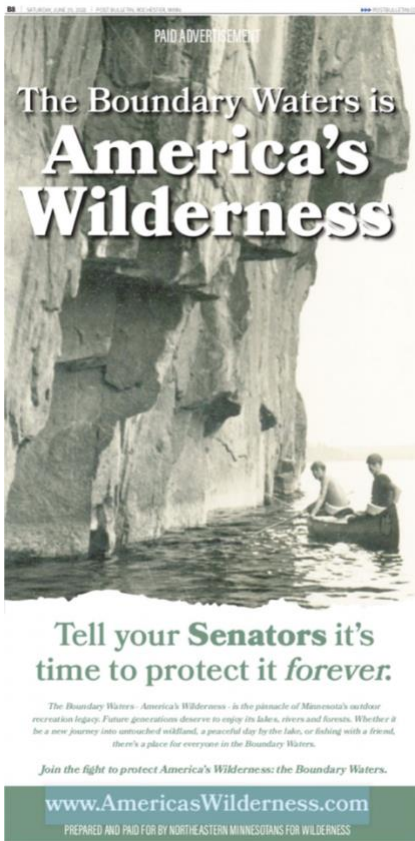


Figure 5 (2022 Impact Report, 2022, p.8)

Caption: “The Boundary Waters - America’s Wilderness – is the pinnacle of Minnesota’s outdoor recreation legacy. Future generations deserve to enjoy its lakes, rivers and forests. Where it be a new journey into untouched wildland, a peaceful day by the lake, or fishing with a friend, there’s a place for everyone in the Boundary Waters. Join the Fight to protect America’s Wilderness: The Boundary Waters.”

The theme of framing the BWCA as American heritage is reinforced by the very frequent reference to protecting the region for future generations. In both the Annual Reports and the recent digital content, Save the Boundary Waters invokes an emotional appeal to save the area for the next generation. This narrative is shown through their annual ‘Kids for the Boundary Waters’ trip to Washington D.C., which facilitates meetings between youth advocates and lawmakers who will eventually be a part of deciding its future (2024 Impact Report, 2024, pp.9-10). This creates an emphasis of intergenerational responsibility, upheld by other statements, such as a quote from the previous Vice-President Walter Mondale: “Defending the Boundary Waters is the obligation of each generation” (Mondale, n.d. as cited in Save the Boundary Waters, 2025a, B5). The suggestions of “legacy gifts” (for example through a legal will), is seen in two Annual Impact Reports (2023, p.30; 2024, p.25)

additionally reinforces the notion of the Boundary Waters as an inherited national asset to be protected.

6.4.4 Colonial Legacy

While the colonial legacy of a *quiet nature* is discussed in section one of this chapter, there are other, more direct references to celebrating the United States' land acquisition. A party commemorating the 60th anniversary of the Wilderness Act (2024 Impact Report, 2024, p.18) turns a blind eye to the deliberate land theft that created the protected area in the first place. Similarly, Article F15 (Save the Boundary Waters, 2025b) celebrates the 50th anniversary of Voyageurs National Park, Minnesota's only National Park, located just west of the Boundary Waters. The park is named for the voyageur settlers who explored the Border Lake regions. Adoration for contemporary white "Explorers" are also mentioned in a recent Earth Day post (Save the Boundary Waters, 2025b, F17). Referring to both the Park's designation and explorers in a romanticized tone directs attention away from the land's stewards and the land theft they endure, instead, paying tribute to the colonial history of conservation.

6.5 Cultural Landscape

Framing the Boundary waters as a place of cultural significance highlights the deep and enduring connections the Anishinaabe have with the region. Shultis and Heffner (2016) remark that highlighting the cultural construction of nature involves presenting the land's cultural significance as a primary frame, coincidentally shaping its perception in conservation discourse. Save the Boundary Waters incorporates Indigenous presence into some of their conservation efforts, however the extent to which this narrative is presented varies and often intersects with other dominant frames.

6.5.1 Cultural Construction of the Boundary Waters

There are a handful of references to the traditional stewards, the Anishinaabe, throughout the reviewed material. This is mainly evident in blanket statements of the land and water holding cultural importance or particular notes on the threat to wild rice habitat, a key resource to Chippewa cultural continuity (Save the Boundary Waters, 2025a, B9). One of the most apparent recognitions of Indigenous presence lies within the 2022 Impact Report (p.5).

"People have lived in the region we now call the boundary waters for countless generations and have a deep relationship to these lands and water. Anishinaabe people (also known in this region as Chippewa or Ojibwe) continue to harvest wild rice in the Boundary Waters region and maintain treaty rights to hunt, fish, and gather. As sovereign nations, tribes play an important role in protecting the boundary waters."

This quote acknowledges the important relationship the Anishinaabe continue to have with their land, however, it lacks depth on the ongoing struggle for land management rights. Later in the 2022 report, Indigenous people are mentioned as one of many stakeholders involved in the movement. Their inclusion is referenced alongside *adventurers, conservation experts, outdoor brands, camps*, and others, reinforcing a framing of the land as a space for exploration and leisure (2022 Impact Report, 2022, p.10). Additionally, Indigenous cultural ties are at times presented in tandem with voyageur history. This is evident in article B3 (Save the Boundary Waters, 2025a), where the Boundary waters are described as “highly cultural (with significant Native American and Voyageur history)”. This suggests an equal claim to the land and water, one that overlooks the colonial dispossession of the Anishinaabe, and weakens their unique historical standing.

6.5.2 Representation

The visibility of those who advocate for protection plays a role in the perception of the land. Across various data sources, Indigenous involvement is acknowledged, but it is not explicitly detailed how they are included in the movement (2023 Impact Report, 2023, p.5). Rather than being embedded as central to the conservation discourse, mentions of Indigenous presence often appear as separate from their argument. This is evident in an article which mentions First Nation’s displacement and land theft as a footnote to a piece about women in conservation (Pam Wright, 2025 as cited in Save the Boundary Waters, 2025b, F12). By separating Indigenous activists from conservation history, this framing effectively others them, acknowledging their presence symbolically rather than memorializing their stewardship.

Save the Boundary Waters mentions Indigenous activism in reference to Deb Haaland’s declaration of protection on federal lands around the BWCA (2022 Impact Report, 2022,

p.3). Haaland is a member of the Laguna Pueblo tribe, displaying Indigenous leadership in federal conservation efforts. However, the organization does not explicitly present her work as within Indigenous activism, rather, as part of broader governmental action, sometimes even accrediting the 20-year ban to Joe Biden (2023 Impact Report, 2023, p.20; U.S. Department of the Interior, 2023b). This does not effectively add to the presence of Indigenous-led environmental advocacy within dominant conservation narratives.

7. Discussion

This chapter addresses the second part of the research question, whether the discovered framing contributes to erasure of Indigenous people. The Boundary Waters is already presented by the Forest Service as a landscape untouched by human hands, aligning with long standing colonial conservation narratives (Whitson, 2020). Though Save the Boundary Waters acknowledges this narrative as harmful to the possibility of erasure, the material they release to the public does not necessarily reflect this.

7.1 Erasing the Original Stewards

The myth of an undeveloped Boundary Waters, as discussed within the purity frame, ignores the history of Indigenous land management which shaped the area to what it is now. Rather, the organization consistently characterizes the Boundary Waters as pristine, reinforcing the misconception of an empty wilderness, naturally void of people. Framing the wilderness as pure to point out the sharp contrast with the threat of pollution, is understandable. However, this framing marginalizes the Indigenous stewards who can be thanked for shaping the very environment that is so widely regarded as beloved today. It overlooks the land management practices and creation of canoe routes that are a crucial part of present-day experience in the region. The emphasis on pure wilderness preservation creates a paradox with Indigenous land rights that must be acknowledged. This is especially important given the affectability of Indigenous conservation and land management efforts (Nelson, 2018, p.256; Tran et al. 2020). By excluding explorations of past and present Anishinaabe stewardship from their conservation advocacy, this framing reinforces a conservation model that fosters Indigenous erasure. The framing of the Wilderness as pristine and worthy of protection has the potential

to prioritize the settler vision of ecological integrity over future Indigenous land management. Their goal to “ensure it remains wild for everyone, forever” (Save the Boundary Waters, 2025, B9) poses a critical question: how do they define wild? And who is prioritized out of everyone?

7.2 Special to Whom?

The vague portrayal of the region as special subtly encourages the audience to project their own values on the Boundary Water’s significance. Given a significant portion of their supporters are invested in the continuation of recreation in the area (Kojola, 2020), this risks promoting a romanticized tourist gaze, as theorized by Urry (1990). While this construction positions the Boundary Waters as a place worth protecting, it reinforces an idealized view of wilderness, instead of acknowledging deeper cultural ties. Research by Kojola (2020) found a similar framing among opponents of the Twin Metal mine, which demonstrates how the perception of wilderness protection may lean towards recreationalist perspectives.

Based on the content presenting the Boundary Waters, outdoor recreationalists appear to be a key audience in their campaign. In contrast, the lack of Indigenous voices intensifies the theme of recreational colonialism in which wilderness is protected for white tourists. This is shown in the 2024 Impact Report (p.10), where only one statement is an emotional appeal that centers an Indigenous perspective, whereas all other statements are made by those involved in the outdoor recreation economy, including recreators, professional athletes and industry stakeholders.

7.3 The Boundary Waters as a Playground

Nash (2014, p.168) refers to National Parks as “playgrounds”, and the framing of the Boundary Waters aligns with this thought. With an emphasis on canoeing, and the broader outdoor recreation economy, Save the Boundary Waters consistently presents the space as an important centerpiece for recreators nationwide. This narrative creates tension between the success of the outdoor economy and restrictions placed on Indigenous treaty rights, such as the inability to fish commercially with a motor, because it impacts the wilderness experience for tourists (U.S. v. Gotchnik, 2000; Whitson, 2020). The importance of the outdoor opportunities is stressed to the extent that it overshadows the deeply rooted cultural

connection the Anishinaabe hold with the land and the water. The outdoor recreation industry has overshadowed Indigenous activism before (Whitson, 2020). Based on the lack of representation of Indigenous actions within the organization's material, there is strong evidence recreationalists are dominating conservation discourse concerning the Boundary Waters.

While pollution from the proposed mine threatens the livelihood of those working in the Boundary Waters' outdoor recreation economy, the continued health of the Boundary Lakes region is essential for the cultural continuity of the Anishinaabe people (Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, n.d.). Evident in the lack of depth to discussions on cultural importance, this conservation discourse often privileges recreation over Indigenous sovereignty by habitually reinforcing the colonial recreation idea of wilderness as a space for leisure. The portrayal infers it is a place to visit, a temporary retreat before returning to society. This reinforces the colonial separation of nature from civilization, arguably perpetuating the mainstream acceptance of disconnecting Indigenous people from their ancestral land at the same time.

Additionally, white voices within the movement claim stewardship responsibilities, framing conservation as task for all American citizens. Wilderness guide Pam Wright supports this in Article B4 by stating "We are stewards of this wilderness, of this water" (Save the Boundary Waters, 2025a). *We* is a universal call to Americans, reinforcing conservation as an inherent duty, though especially to those who partake in outdoor activities. The notion that all Americans are responsible for preventing pollution is not necessarily harmful, however, it has the potential to overwrite Indigenous sovereignty by subtly excluding them from the center of the environmental stewardship discussion. This dilutes the much older relationship Indigenous people have with caring for the region, instead portraying conservation as a patriotic act.

7.4 Romanticizing American Colonialism

The nationalist framing of the land further contributes to Indigenous erasure by overshadowing the cultural importance of the land and its ecosystem to Indigenous caretakers, replacing it with a narrative of heritage tied to a mainstream American identity. Referring to the Boundary Waters as *America's Wilderness*, as shown in figure 5, is substantial evidence of this. This figure is also a more extreme example of diminishing

Indigenous presence by describing the land as “untouched”. As a value laden term, it negates Indigenous ancestral land claims and is especially significant considering the large audience it reached. This framing risks undermining the possibility of a more inclusive advocacy and future management of the Boundary Waters.

By portraying the land as owned universally by all Americans, Save the Boundary Waters flattens deep cultural ties into a commodified perception of the landscape. While they argue the next generation should be able to experience the Boundary Waters in its pristine state, this framing ignores the reality that Indigenous people were not afforded the same privilege when their land was forcibly taken. Save the Boundary Waters consistently stresses the region as an American asset, while neglecting to meaningfully acknowledge how it was acquired in the first place, through land theft (Dawes Act, 1887).

The idea of collective ownership reflects broader societal tendencies of post-colonial states’ presuming ownership over ‘their’ Indigenous population (Queen’s University, n.d.). Referring to First Nation People as ‘our Indigenous people’ can contribute to othering as it implies a sense of possession, which reinforces colonial power dynamics. This phrasing also serves to subtly separate Indigenous populations from conventional citizens, while simultaneously assuming their participation in the nation, rather than as sovereign nations.

7.5 Reframing the Cultural Connection

Across the reviewed data, only one direct quote was attributed to an Indigenous individual belonging to a tribe apart of the 1854 treaty, a child of the Bois Forte Band (2024 Impact Report, 2024, p.10). This highlights the lack of Indigenous voices in the movement’s messaging. While they do acknowledge the Boundary Waters as Indigenous land, the limited scope of representation within Save the Boundary Waters’ content limits the culturally significant frame. Broadening their content to include Indigenous perspectives would allow for a more nuanced discourse, one that moves beyond recreation centered narratives.

A post shared from The Conservation Alliance describes the Boundary Waters as:

“...the most visited wilderness in the U.S. For generations people have paddled its lakes and hiked its rugged trails. It’s a critical habitat for wildlife, a cornerstone of Indigenous culture, and a vital part of Minnesota’s identity—and the state’s \$13.5 billion outdoor economy.”

This description is exemplary of the major frames uncovered in this study, covering the importance of a clean ecosystem, the recreation opportunities, a nationalist view, and an acknowledgment of its cultural significance. Yet, the inclusion of the First Nation’s cultural connection is followed with a reference to the importance of the area to the average Minnesotan and the outdoor economy. By equating the Indigenous relationship to the land with settler experiences, Save the Boundary Waters further diminishes the distinct and deeply rooted reliance Indigenous people have with the land.

Conservation discourse has historically been disengaged from broader Indigenous self-determination efforts, preferring to focus on other aspects of land protection. Following this pattern, Save the Boundary Waters appears hesitant to critically reflect on the colonial roots of their conservation, which historically served to erase the Anishinaabe from the landscape (Hilgren, 2021). Beyond a brief acknowledgement on their website, mentions about the forced removal and deliberate disassembly of their cultural identity are scarce (Save the Boundary Waters, n.d.). The lack of discussion to their land management and displacement subtly implies that settler conservation is prioritized over accountability.

8. Conclusion

The most prevalent frames in Save the Boundary Waters’ content do not appear to prioritize rewriting the story of Indigenous erasure evident in the Boundary Water’s conservation history. Their messaging does not just privilege recreation, it also reinforces a nationalist framing by presenting the space as an asset that belongs to all Americans. They’ve missed the opportunity to connect the areas unique ecology to its cultural importance, as the landscape has been shaped by its Indigenous stewards for centuries (Larson et al. 2019; Larson et al. 2021). Integrating Indigenous voices more prominently within environmental advocacy would not only reinforce the land’s cultural importance but also challenge dominant settler-colonial frameworks. More depth to this frame could emphasize Indigenous traditional ecological knowledge, land management practices, and historical continuity, and position

conservation as part of a broader movement for Indigenous land justice rather than just an extension of mainstream environmentalism. Situating Indigenous land struggles within conservation discourse may also facilitate a more effective campaign, as evident in the resilience of Indigenous activists (Norman, 2017).

At the moment, the dominant cultural connection found in the boundary waters appears to be between a tourist and a quiet lake. While this framing positions the Boundary Waters as a space worth protecting, it fails to fully integrate the place's significance to individuals beyond recreational use in a way that is considered genuinely inclusive. Instead, Indigenous connections to the land appear as a symbolic acknowledgement, rather than substantive engagement with their stewardship and historical ties. This tension offers an opportunity for reflection on modern conservation's role in colonial dispossession. It would seem that contemporary conservation can, either intentionally or unintentionally, serve as a barrier to acknowledging land theft. This paper adds to a growing number of calls for the decolonization of conservation, underscoring the need for more inclusive framing of public land as ancestral land. Conservationists must consider whether their vision of a protected Boundary Waters, and broader preservation narratives, includes justice for Indigenous land theft, or whether it ultimately upholds the colonial ideal of a mythical pure wilderness, potentially at the expense of Indigenous sovereignty.

8.1 Recommendations for Future Research

This analysis is not meant to reduce the conservation discourse of the Boundary Waters to this singular organization's framing of the Wilderness area. While this study examines the framing of the BWCA through Save the Boundary Waters' messaging, it does not fully address the dynamics of framing from multiple perspectives. This study focuses primarily on how a single organization constructs its narrative, rather than how multiple, competing frames interact in public discourse. Although research on the impact of competing frames is limited (Chong & Druckman, 2007), it could be valuable to explore in the future. It would also be valuable to investigate the impact of these frames on a diverse sample of stakeholders.

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10. Appendix

Blog Posts			
Article	Title	Author (When applicable)	Date
B1	Our commitment to protecting the Boundary Waters remains unshakable, and together, we are stronger than ever	Save the Boundary Waters	Nov 7, 2024
B2	Kids for the Boundary Waters in Washington, D.C.	Megan Wind	Dec 9, 2024
B3	Bismark Tribune - Joe Banavige: Burgum can help save Boundary Waters	Joe Banavige	Dec 13, 2024
B4	The Boundary Waters - a land of water & sky	Pam Wright, Wilderness Guide	Dec 19, 2024
B5	Walter Mondale's Enduring Legacy for the Boundary Waters	Save the Boundary Waters	Jan 3, 2025
B6	The healing power of the Boundary Waters: a Dark Sky Sanctuary	Heather Westmoreland	Jan 8, 2025
B7	Save the Boundary Waters - January 2025 Issue Update	n/a	Jan 21, 2025
B8	Save the Boundary Waters - February 2025 Issue Update	n/a	Feb 5, 2025
B9	What makes the Boundary Waters so special?	n/a	Feb 27, 2025
B10	What exactly is copper mining, and why does it pose a threat to the Boundary Waters?	n/a	Mar 5, 2025
B11	Who's who in the escalating rush to ruin the Boundary Waters?	Libby London, Save the Boundary Waters	Mar 17, 2025
B12	Which is better for the economy: the Boundary Waters or a copper mine?	Libby London, Save the Boundary Waters	Mar 19, 2025
Facebook Posts			
Article	Summary of Post		Date
F1	Photo: Don't let this... become this. Caption: Stating a commitment to fight through the next Trump presidency.		Nov 7, 2024

F2	Photo: Thank you veterans for your service. Caption: Thanking veterans.	Nov 11, 2024
F3	Sharing the Startribune article: Barcum: Our stewardship obligations still require a no on this mine, this location	Nov 25, 2024
F4	Sharing the Backcountry Film Festival Event, hosted by Save the Boundary Waters and Superior Highland Backcountry	Jan 7, 2025
F5	Sharing the blog post: Boundary Waters Permit Opener- January 29, 2025	Jan 15, 2025
F6	Inauguration Day, the clock is ticking for the Boundary Waters	Jan 20, 2025
F7	Sharing Congresswoman Betty McCollum's post announcing the re-introduction of the Boundary Waters Wilderness Protection and Pollution Prevention Act.	Jan 21, 2025
F8	Happy Permit Day! With information about options if the readers was not able to secure a permit.	Jan 29, 2025
F9	Sharing the MNDaily article: Boundary Waters protection bill reintroduced as advocates, students worry	Feb 6, 2025
F10	Photo: Two people and a dog loading their canoe near a lake shore. Announcing their booth at Canoeopia in Wisconsin	Mar 7, 2025
F11	Sharing a post by The Conservation Alliance announcing Protecting the Boundary Waters as a priority campaign this year.	Mar 19, 2025
F12	Sharing a webpage from Quetico-Superior Org: Women who shaped Minnesota's early conservation movement	Mar 25, 2025
F13	Celebrating the birthday of Sigurd Olson	April 5, 2025
F14	Sharing a MPR News piece: Voyageurs, Minnesota's only national park, celebrated 50th anniversary	April 8, 2025
F15	Sharing a StarTribune opinion piece: Burcum: A worth political legacy: permanent Boundary Waters protections	April 14, 2025
F16	"Happy Earth Day! Enjoy this peaceful Boundary Waters moment with Explorers Dave and Amy Freeman."	April 22, 2025
F17	Video of the Northern Lights, announcing it is International Dark Sky Week.	April 24, 2025
F18	Sharing MPR News article: Forest Service won't issue Boundary Waters canoeing permits at busy Ely and Grand Marais ranger stations	April 25, 2025

F19	Sharing StarTribune Piece: Walz casts doubt on environmental safety of mining near Boundary Waters	April 27, 2025
F20	Sharing the Minnesota Reformer peice: Is Trump good for business? Not ours.	May 2, 2025
F21	House Natural Resources Committee passes reconciliation bill that dismantles Boundary Waters protections from copper mining.	May 7, 2025
F22	Sharing an "excellent" Star Tribune Opinion Piece: Burcum: Stauber sweetend sweetheart deal for Chilean mining firm	May 12, 2025