

Graduate Internship Opportunity

SUMMER 2026

Project Title

Practicing Reciprocity: Exploring Community-Led Frameworks for Complementary Co-existence of Land Interests in the Wake of the *Tl'uqtinus* decision (2025 BCSC 1490)

Organization

Reciprocity Trust

About the Opportunity – Sustainability Scholars Program Info

These 250-hour internships are offered in partnership with community organizations and provide UVic graduate students from any discipline with opportunities to gain applied sustainability research experience. Scholars work under the guidance of a partner mentor and contribute to projects with real community impact.

The 2026 pay rate is approximately \$34.72/hour. To apply, visit the [Sustainability Scholars Program website](#) and review the application guide to confirm eligibility and required materials. Applications close at 11:59 pm PT on Sunday, February 1, 2026. Questions? Contact Laurel Currie: sustainability-scholars@uvic.ca.

Project Summary

This applied research project explores how Indigenous-serving community-based initiatives that offer action pathways for guests on Indigenous lands can support meaningful, non-adversarial engagement with Indigenous land rights in highly privatized urban landscapes. It focuses on the relational realm of individual responsibility that operates alongside government negotiations and litigation, and how this space expands, contracts, and otherwise responds in dialogue to court decisions, advancements in Aboriginal law, and shifting policy stances.

Working with the non-profit society Reciprocity Trusts, the Scholar will examine the relevance of the 2025 landmark decision *Cowichan Tribes v Canada (Attorney General)* to everyday relationships on unceded, shared lands. Particular attention will be paid to how the Court's findings illuminate ongoing tensions between Aboriginal title and fee simple title, as well as competing cultural and economic motivations behind privatization. The project will also explore what cross-cultural world-building practices rooted in individual responsibility and relational reciprocity can look like within a context of capitalist-colonial inheritance and the systemic reflexes that exist to absorb and neutralize challenges to the status-quo of land commodification.

The project will also explore how Reciprocity Trusts and similar “rent” payment initiatives can support *improved and humanized* Indigenous–settler relationships by offering voluntary, non-litigious pathways for active accountability and relationship-building. It will look at the risks and benefits of offering pathways for material action in the face of mounting frustration around the recognition politics of rhetorical performances of accountability (i.e. institutionalized land acknowledgements). In addition, the Scholar will analyze existing research and public discourse on Indigenous land rights, financial reconciliation, and giving or philanthropy to better understand public sentiment, motivations, and barriers to participation across different demographics.

The expected outcomes include a final research report with practical insights and recommendations that Reciprocity Trusts can use to strengthen its communications, outreach, and public engagement strategies. The project will produce actionable guidance to help translate complex legal and structural issues into accessible, values-based approaches that support grassroots mobilization for Indigenous community-led socio-economic, cultural and environmental sustainability initiatives while furthering long-term regional resilience and social cohesion.

Sustainability Focus

This project contributes to sustainability by addressing how long-term relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities on shared lands can be more mutualistic, resilient, and enduring—particularly in urban contexts.

- **Social Sustainability:**

The project supports social sustainability by exploring non-adversarial ways of engaging with Indigenous land rights. By examining reciprocity-based approaches that emphasize relationship-building, accountability, and shared responsibility, the project helps identify pathways for healthier and more equitable relationships between Indigenous Nations and diverse urban communities that honour multiple stories of connection to place while respecting Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination.

- **Cultural Sustainability:**

Indigenous land rights are deeply connected to culture, identity, and governance. This project contributes to cultural sustainability by engaging with Aboriginal title as a living relationship to land and by supporting initiatives that respect Indigenous laws and worldviews, rather than reducing land to a purely economic or legal asset.

- **Economic Sustainability:**

The project examines how financial reciprocity and voluntary giving can help address economic imbalances created by land privatization. By exploring how wealth generated through private land use can be shared more equitably, the project contributes to conversations about sustainable and ethical economic relationships.

- **Governance Sustainability:**

By studying alternatives to litigation-based approaches, the project contributes to

governance sustainability. It explores how community-led, voluntary initiatives can complement legal systems, reduce conflict, and support more durable and adaptable approaches to land governance over time.

Project Background

Reciprocity Trusts was established in 2023 to address a persistent gap in reconciliation efforts, particularly in urban contexts where land has been almost entirely privatized. While many residents live and work on unceded Indigenous lands, dominant systems of fee simple ownership often limit opportunities for individuals to meaningfully recognize Indigenous land rights or take responsibility beyond symbolic land acknowledgements.

Reciprocity Trusts offers a voluntary, ongoing, and relationship-based approach to Indigenous land recognition. Through financial reciprocity directed to participating Indigenous Nations, the model creates space for accountability and connection within highly privatized land systems, without relying on litigation or government-led processes. This work engages multiple dimensions of sustainability, including social and cultural sustainability (through relationship-building and reconciliation), governance sustainability (by exploring alternatives to solely legal or state-led approaches), and economic sustainability (by rethinking how wealth generated through privatized land can be shared more equitably).

In 2025, the Supreme Court of British Columbia's decision in *Cowichan Tribes v. Canada (Attorney General)* (the *Tl'uqtinus* decision) fundamentally shifted the landscape of land rights in British Columbia by reaffirming that Aboriginal title is a constitutionally protected interest that was not extinguished by colonization or historic Crown grants. As such, Aboriginal title is a "prior and senior legal interest that burdens the fee simple interest." Importantly, the court clarified that these rights are "complementary rather than contradictory," aiming for a "just and harmonious relationship" (2025 BCSC 1490 at paras. 3550-3560) between Indigenous and settler communities. While the court issued a suspended declaration to allow for "meaningful negotiations," this creates a significant temporal and practical gap for residents who seek certainty and/or wish to proactively address this legal reality.

Although the *Tl'uqtinus* decision addressed specific lands, it underscored broader structural challenges that Reciprocity Trusts was created to respond to prior to the ruling—namely, the disconnect between Indigenous land rights and property regimes that frame land as exclusively owned, transferable, and detached from Indigenous law, governance, and relationship. This project explores how community-based initiatives such as Reciprocity Trusts can be understood in relation to these tensions, and how voluntary, non-litigious approaches may complement legal recognition of Indigenous land rights while supporting long-term socio-economic, environmental and cultural sustainability and foster lasting regional resilience and social cohesion.

Project Description

This applied research project explores how community-based initiatives can support meaningful, non-adversarial engagement with Indigenous land rights in everyday contexts, particularly in urban areas shaped by privatized land ownership.

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The project has three interconnected areas of focus. First, the Scholar will examine the relevance of the *Tl'uqtinus* decision to the work of Reciprocity Trusts by exploring how the Court's findings illuminate ongoing challenges related to Aboriginal title, land privatization, and individual responsibility. This analysis will consider how legal recognition of Indigenous land rights intersects with the lived realities of residents in highly privatized urban settings.

Second, the project will examine how Reciprocity Trusts and other similar initiatives can support and encourage relationships between host Nations and guests on their land that are *just and harmonious* rather than adversarial or steeped in guilt, denial or hegemonic incentives. This component will explore voluntary, non-litigious, grassroots approaches to land recognition and reconciliation, and consider how reciprocity-based models may complement legal processes by fostering accountability, relationship-building, and shared responsibility and dispelling fear.

Third, the Scholar will explore current public sentiment related to Indigenous land rights, financial reconciliation, and giving or philanthropy more broadly. Drawing on existing research, public discourse, and comparable initiatives, this component will seek to identify motivations, barriers, and points of resonance that can help Reciprocity Trusts more effectively communicate its mission, appeal to a wider audience, and encourage meaningful public participation.

Across all three areas, the project emphasizes applied learning and practical outcomes, linking legal analysis, community practice, and public engagement in ways that support **social, cultural, governance, and economic sustainability** in urban contexts.

Project Scope

The Scholar will have the opportunity to work with the Reciprocity Trusts mentor to identify and refine research questions and methods aligned with the project description and the Scholar's personal and academic goals for this program. Potential research methods include desktop review and research, data analysis, interviews and/or small focus groups discussions with Indigenous leadership involved in Reciprocity Trusts, property owners who make reciprocity payments and/or the public who are not currently involved in Reciprocity Trusts.

The following areas of inquiry are intended to guide the Scholar's approach.

1. Relevance of the *Tl'uqtinus* Decision to Community-Based Land Recognition

The Scholar may explore the relevance of the *Tl'uqtinus* decision to the work of Reciprocity Trusts by examining how the Court's findings illuminate ongoing challenges related to Aboriginal title, land privatization, and individual responsibility. This could include analysis of how the decision clarifies the relationship between Aboriginal title and fee simple ownership, and how it highlights the limits of Canadian legal and property systems in addressing Indigenous land rights in everyday, urban contexts.

2. Reciprocity and Non-Adversarial Approaches to Indigenous–Settler Relations

The Scholar may examine how Reciprocity Trusts, alongside other similar community-based or reciprocity-oriented initiatives, can support and encourage relationships that are *just and harmonious* (rather than adversarial). This component could explore how voluntary, non-litigious approaches to land recognition may complement legal and policy-based

reconciliation efforts. The Scholar may explore what cross-cultural world-building practices rooted in individual responsibility and relational reciprocity can look like within a context of capitalist-colonial inheritance and the systemic reflexes that exist to absorb and neutralize challenges to the status-quo of land commodification.

3. Public Sentiment, Financial Reconciliation, and Engagement

The Scholar may explore current public sentiment related to Indigenous land rights, financial reconciliation, and giving or philanthropy more broadly, as well as how the realm of individual responsibility responds to court decisions, advancements in Aboriginal law, and shifting official policy stances. This may include a review of existing research, public discourse, and comparable initiatives to better understand motivations, barriers, and points of resonance for the public. The goal of this component is to identify insights that can help Reciprocity Trusts more effectively communicate its mission, appeal to a wider audience, and encourage meaningful participation in reciprocity-based approaches to land recognition.

Deliverables

- **Final Research Report (*potentially including the following: scope TBD based on Scholar/Mentor interests*):**
 - An accessible analysis of the *Tl'uqtinus* decision and its relevance to community-based land recognition, with particular attention to Aboriginal title, land privatization, and individual responsibility
 - A comparative examination of Reciprocity Trusts and other relationship-based financial reconciliation initiatives that seek to support just and harmonious Indigenous-settler relationships outside of adversarial, government or litigation-driven processes
 - An analysis of current public sentiment related to Indigenous land rights, financial reconciliation, and giving/philanthropy, drawing on existing research, public discourse, and comparable initiatives
 - Practical insights and recommendations to support Reciprocity Trusts' mission, including considerations for communication, outreach, and public engagement
 - Discussion of implications of Reciprocity Trusts and Indigenous-settler relational healing on the long term socio-economic, environmental and cultural sustainability of local Indigenous Nations and their ancestral lands
- **Knowledge-Sharing:**
 - A short summary or briefing document for Reciprocity Trusts stakeholders
 - A presentation or facilitated discussion to share findings and reflect on next steps with Reciprocity Trusts leadership

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Time Commitment + Timeline

- **Program period:** May 1 – August 15, 2026
- **Total hours:** Approximately 250 hours
- May–June: Background research and contextual analysis
- June–July: Case study exploration and synthesis
- July–August: Writing and final deliverables

Required / Preferred Skills and Experience

- Excellent research and writing skills
- Demonstrated interest in sustainability
- Familiarity with research methodologies and survey techniques
- Ability to work independently
- Deadline-oriented
- Background experience in environmental studies, Indigenous studies, law, public policy, planning, or related fields

Additional Information

The ideal Scholar is comfortable navigating the intersections of **Indigenous law and social economy**. Our mentorship style is highly relational; the Scholar will be integrated into our team, attending meetings and learning how we translate complex legal decisions into community action. We provide a unique environment for a student to see how **applied research** directly influences the sustainability of a growing non-profit organization

The Scholar is expected to work primarily remotely but should be available for periodic in-person or virtual meetings with the Greater Victoria-based team.