HONOR NATIVE LAND:
A GUIDE AND CALL TO ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Marchers at Standing Rock 2016; Photo by Nicholas Ward

We call on all individuals and organizations to open all public events and gatherings with acknowledgment of the traditional Native inhabitants of the land.

TOGETHER, WE CREATE.

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Dear Citizen Artist,

We launch this guide in the lead-up to Indigenous People's Day 2017, when each of us is free to choose whether to accept and perpetuate a distorted history or stand for truth and reconciliation grounded in acknowledgment. The time is long overdue for everyone to open all public events and gatherings with acknowledgment of the traditional Native inhabitants of the land. Please help to spread this guide, encouraging your colleagues, neighbors, officials, and institutions to adopt this practice as well.

The U.S. Department of Arts and Culture is a people-powered department, a grassroots action network inciting creativity and social imagination to shape a culture of empathy, equity, and belonging. We are grateful to all of the partners whose work inspired this guide. Special thanks to the following individuals who offered insight and support in its creation: T. Lulani Arquette (Native Hawaiian), Daniel Banks, Sherry Salway Black (Oglala Lakota), Lori Pourier (Oglala Lakota), Shirley Sneve (Rosebud Sioux), Rulan Tangen (mixed Indigenous heritage), Josh Reid (Snohomish), Tanaya Winder (Duckwater Shoshone/Pyramid Lake Paiute/Southern Ute) and Larissa FastHorse (Sicangu Nation Lakota) and Ty Defoe (Ojibwe/Oneida) of Indigenous Direction. Thank you to Nicholas Ward, Connie Fitzpatrick, and the Native Arts and Cultures Foundation for use of their photographs, and Keith BraveHeart (Oceti Sakowin: Oglala Lakota), Bunky Echo-Hawk (Pawnee/Yakama), Marlena Myles (Spirit Lake Dakota), Bryan D. Parker (Muscogee Creek/Choctaw/White Mountain Apache), Remy (Diné), and William Wilson (Diné) for the use of their artwork. Any omissions or errors are the responsibility of the USDAC.

Please feel free to be in touch: hello@usdac.us.

With gratitude,

The USDAC

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"Before Here Was Here" by Bunky Echo-Hawk (Pawnee/Yakama)

INTRODUCTION

We were a people before "We the People."

Jefferson Keel (Chickasaw), 20th President of the National Congress of American Indians, 2013

IN COUNTRIES SUCH AS NEW ZEALAND, AUSTRALIA, CANADA, AND AMONG TRIBAL NATIONS IN THE U.S., it is commonplace, even policy, to open events and gatherings by acknowledging the traditional Indigenous inhabitants of that land. While some individuals and cultural and educational institutions in the United States have adopted this custom, the vast majority have not.

Together, we can spark a movement to make acknowledgment of traditional lands a regular practice at public and private events.

Acknowledgment is a simple, powerful way of showing respect and a step toward correcting the stories and practices that erase Indigenous people's history and culture and toward inviting and honoring the truth. Imagine this practice widely adopted: imagine cultural venues, classrooms, conference settings, places of worship, sports stadiums, and town halls, acknowledging traditional lands. Millions would be exposed–many for the first time–to the names of the traditional Indigenous inhabitants of the lands they are on, inspiring them to ongoing awareness and action.

For more than five hundred years, Native communities across the Americas have demonstrated resilience and resistance in the face of violent efforts to separate them from their land, culture, and each other. They remain at the forefront of movements to protect Mother Earth and the life the earth sustains. Today, corporate greed and federal policy push agendas to extract wealth from the earth, degrading sacred land in blatant disregard of treaty rights. Acknowledgment is a critical public intervention, a necessary step toward honoring Native communities and enacting the much larger project of decolonization and reconciliation.

We call on all artists, cultural workers, public officials, educators, administrators, community leaders, organizers, and engaged community members to open all public events and gatherings with acknowledgment of the traditional Native inhabitants of the land.

Photo courtesy of Native Arts and Cultures Foundation

WHAT IS LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT?

Acknowledgment by itself is a small gesture. It becomes meaningful when coupled with authentic relationships and informed action. But this beginning can be an opening to greater public consciousness of Native sovereignty and cultural rights, a step toward equitable relationship and reconciliation. Join us in adopting, calling for, and spreading this practice.

Naming is an exercise in power. Who gets the right to name or be named? Whose stories are honored in a name? Whose are erased? Acknowledgment of traditional land is a public statement of the name of the traditional Native inhabitants of a place. It honors their historic relationship with the land.

> *A Land Acknowledgment is a formal statement that recognizes the unique and enduring relationship that exists between Indigenous Peoples and their traditional territories.*
>
> Laurier Students' Public Interest Research Group, Ontario, Canada
> http://www.lspirg.org/knowtheland/

WHY INTRODUCE THE PRACTICE OF LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT?

Photo by Nicholas Ward

- Offer recognition and respect.
- Counter the "doctrine of discovery" with the true story of the people who were already here.
- Create a broader public awareness of the history that has led to this moment.
- Begin to repair relationships with Native communities and with the land.
- Support larger truth-telling and reconciliation efforts.
- Remind people that colonization is an ongoing process, with Native lands still occupied due to deceptive and broken treaties and practices of eminent domain and other mechanisms intended to benefit government or corporate America.
- Take a cue from Indigenous protocols, opening up spaces with reverence and respect.
- Inspire ongoing action and relationships.

Many countries are far ahead of the United States in adopting this practice. In Australia, New Zealand, and Canada there are protocols, maps, and pronunciation guides readily available. Many universities have made acknowledgment a policy, providing simple templates for students, staff, and faculty. Beginning in 2016, **all Toronto public schools** began opening their school days with a statement of acknowledgment.

The **University of Alberta** offers this explanation of acknowledgment:

> *To acknowledge the traditional territory is to recognize its longer history, reaching beyond colonization and the establishment of European colonies, as well as its significance for the Indigenous peoples who lived and continue to live upon this territory, and whose practices and spiritualities were tied to the land and continue to develop in relationship to the land and its other inhabitants today.*

Acknowledgment in these countries is a small part of a more significant commitment to truth and reconciliation–including official **government apologies** and **truth commissions** leading to significant public recommendations and reforms.

In Australia, many formal events begin with a "Welcome to Country." While a Land Acknowledgment can be offered by anyone hosting or leading an event, a Welcome to Country is offered by an Indigenous elder or community leader. The custom is to offer compensation for leading this more formal ceremonial welcome.

A FEW DISCLAIMERS ABOUT ACKNOWLEDGMENT:

- **It's simple. And also not so simple**. In some cases the traditional inhabitants of a place may be clear. In other cases whom to recognize is much less so. Do your research. While the act of naming traditional inhabitants may not take much time, moving into right relationship requires preparation.
- **This guide doesn't offer the one right way to acknowledge**. What's offered here is not a comprehensive checklist or set of universally acceptable protocols. There are currently 567 federally recognized tribal nations, each with its own history and protocols for welcome and acknowledgment. There are also state-recognized tribes and peoples, including Native Hawaiians who reside on six islands. There is no one way of doing this.
- **Acknowledgment is made meaningful through specific context and relationship.** Whenever possible, the best entry point into the practice of acknowledgment is through relationship and dialogue with Native communities in the area.
- **The practice of formal welcome and acknowledgment of land is not new**. Acknowledgment has long been practiced–typically in much more nuanced, formal, and ceremonial ways–within Indigenous communities. Many artists, activists, presenters, academics, and others have been starting events with acknowledgment for decades. By publishing this guide, we hope to draw on these histories to help spark a movement to make acknowledgment commonplace.
- **Acknowledgment is but a first step**. It does not stand in for relationship and action, but can begin to point toward deeper possibilities for decolonizing relationships with people and place.

DID YOU KNOW? **Between 1776 and 1887, the United States seized over 1.5 billion acres from America's indigenous people by treaty and executive order.**

This interactive Invasion of America map shows how that happened over time. Note that Alaska and Hawaii are not included.

HOW TO ACKNOWLEDGE

Below are suggested steps to acknowledging traditional land at the opening of a public gathering or event. The best way to root this practice in a local context is through dialogue with local Native groups. Not yet having those relationships doesn't mean you can't begin.

STEP ONE: IDENTIFY

The first step is identifying the traditional inhabitants of the lands you're on. This task may be complicated by multiple and contested histories of settlement, resettlement, and recognition. Many places are now home to Native people who have called that land home from time immemorial and also to those relocated from elsewhere. The goal of acknowledgment is recognizing and uplifting, not hurting or causing further division. So it is important to proceed with care, doing good research before making statements of acknowledgment.

Here are some places you can look online:

- Wikipedia entries on many cities document some history of Indigenous inhabitation. Be sure to cross-check what you find there with other sources.
- This map of Native Land is one of the more comprehensive maps available: **https://native-land.ca/**
- The Native Languages site offers breakdown by state, with contact information for local tribes: **http://www.native-languages.org/**

In addition to consulting local Native individuals and organizations, you can check to see if there are resources at local universities and colleges, especially those with American Indian/Native/Indigenous Studies centers, programs, and/or departments.

If multiple tribal groups claim belonging to the land, consider not naming one particular group or naming all of them. Ideally, this decision should be made through dialogue with local Native elders and culture bearers, respecting their wishes about how they desire to be named.

A DEEPER STEP: Identify Native elders and culture-bearers in your region to join in a conversation about how they would like to see this practice take shape locally, particularly how it could be of greatest benefit for their communities. You can use this guide as a jumping-off place for conversation. If you are part of an organization or group, consider offering an honorarium to those who take part in the dialogue. This dialogue could also be a public forum, engaging others who want to learn about this practice. Or you could share a video, transcript, or other reporting to inform and engage the wider community.

STEP TWO: ARTICULATE

Once you've identified the group or groups who should be recognized, formulate the statement of acknowledgment you'll share at the beginning of public gatherings. There is no exact script for this. Craft yours after considering several levels of detail you might introduce.

At its simplest, an acknowledgment could look like this:

"We acknowledge that we are on the traditional land of the _____ People."

Beginning with just this simple sentence would be a meaningful intervention in most U.S. gathering spaces.

From there, there are many other elements to bring into acknowledgment:

Often, statements specifically honor elders:

"I would like to acknowledge that this meeting is being held on the traditional lands of the _____ People, and pay my respect to elders both past and present."

Some allude to the caring, reciprocal relationship with land:

"I want to respectfully acknowledge the _____ People, who have stewarded this land throughout the generations."

Acknowledgments may also make explicit mention of the occupied, unceded nature of the territory in which a gathering is taking place:

"We would like to begin by acknowledging that the land on which we gather is the occupied/unceded/ seized territory of the _____ People."

"I would like to begin by acknowledging that we are in _____, the ancestral and unceded territory of the _____ People.

In Canada it is not uncommon to make mention of the specific treaties by which land was designated to a particular tribal group. You may wish to do additional research to name the moment at which treaties were made as well as when they were broken and land unlawfully taken.

The truth is complicated. Beneath the contemporary surface of any site in the United States, there are histories of belonging that have been erased, overlooked, contested and forgotten, all ways to support ideas like "manifest destiny" which justified the conquest of Native lands. Lengthier statements of acknowledgment can center Native communities while also acknowledging the many communities that have contributed to the existing culture of place. For example:

Photo by Connie Fitzpatrick

"Every community owes its existence and vitality to generations from around the world who contributed their hopes, dreams, and energy to making the history that led to this moment. Some were brought here against their will, some were drawn to leave their distant homes in hope of a better life, and some have lived on this land for more generations than can be counted. Truth and acknowledgment are critical to building mutual respect and connection across all barriers of heritage and difference. We begin this effort to acknowledge what has been buried by honoring the truth. We are standing on the ancestral lands of the _____ People [if possible, add more specific detail about the nature of the occupied land]. We pay respects to their elders past and present. Please take a moment to consider the many legacies of violence, displacement, migration, and settlement that bring us together here today. And please join us in uncovering such truths at any and all public events."

You may choose to begin with a simple statement of acknowledgment and elaborate over time as you learn more, build relationships with members of local Native communities, and grow more comfortable with the practice.

"Takunsa Unsikila"
by Keith BraveHeart
(Oceti Sakowin: Oglala Lakota)

DID YOU KNOW? "There are 567 federally recognized Indian Nations (variously called tribes, nations, bands, pueblos, communities and native villages) in the United States... Additionally, there are state recognized tribes located throughout the United States recognized by their respective state governments."

Learn more from the National Congress of American Indians

STEP THREE: DELIVER

Once you've identified whom to name and practiced your statement (including pronunciation of names), offer your acknowledgment as the first element of a welcome to the next public gathering or event that you host. If in the process of learning about acknowledgment you've built relationships with members of Native communities, consider inviting them to give a welcome before yours.

There's a danger that a practice like this becomes just another piece of protocol, delivered flatly and falling on deaf ears. How many times have you spaced out as the flight attendant goes through emergency procedures? Or failed to silence your cell phone even though that was requested at the beginning of a show?

Acknowledgment should be approached not as a set of obligatory words to rush through. These words should be offered with respect, grounded in authentic reflection, presence, and awareness. As you step up to offer acknowledgment, breathe in awareness of both the present and of the histories that connect you with the people you are naming. Consider your own place in the story of colonization and of undoing its legacy. At your next gathering, try acknowledgment out, see how it feels, observe how or if it shifts the room. Over time, through practice, you'll learn more about what it means and what it opens up for you and others.

Statements of acknowledgment don't have to be confined to spoken words. Some artists, scholars, activists, and others have begun to include acknowledgment in email signatures or on websites. Consider using social media to amplify your acknowledgment. For example, post an image or a story of an event where your acknowledgment was offered, tagging it **#HonorNativeLand** to inspire others..

Any space, three-dimensional or digital, presents an opportunity to surface buried truths and lift up Native sovereignty, priming our collective culture for deeper truth and reconciliation efforts.

"Annual Canoe Journey, Washington" Photo courtesy of Native Arts and Cultures Foundation

"We are still America. We Know the rumors of our demise. We spit them out. They Die Soon."

Joy Harjo (Muscogee), 2015 *Poetic Address to the Nation*

BEYOND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Acknowledgment is the beginning. Acknowledgment–and the research required to do it with integrity–should be an invitation to deeper analysis, relationship, and action.

> "I think we need to start imagining a constellation of relationships that must be entered into beyond territorial acknowledgments. Great, that's awesome you know you're on (for example) Treaty 6 territory. That's great you acknowledge that perhaps the Indigenous view of that treaty, that the land was not surrendered, is correct. Perhaps you understand the tension of your presence as illegitimate, but don't know how to deal with it beyond naming it. Maybe now it is time to start learning about your obligations as a guest in this territory. What are the Indigenous protocols involved in being a guest, what are your responsibilities? What responsibilities do your hosts have towards you, and are you making space for those responsibilities to be exercised? To what extent are your events benefiting your hosts?"
>
> – Chelsea Vowel, Métis from the Plains Cree speaking community of Lac Ste. Anne, Alberta
> http://apihtawikosisan.com/2016/09/beyond-territorial-acknowledgments/

LEARN MORE

Take time to learn about the Indigenous history of the land you live on, as well as the contemporary context of Native groups in your region. Search for books, articles, people, and organizations that you can learn from.

- Find syllabi online to follow on your own or with a study group. Here is an example of **a thoughtful syllabus** created in solidarity with efforts at Standing Rock to resist the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline.
- For an overview of Tribal Nations and their historical relationship to the U.S. government, **read this primer** from the National Congress of American Indians.
- Educate yourself on the history of settler colonialism and genocide in the United States by reading (or listening to) ***An Indigenous People's History of the United States*** by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz.
- Learn about the history of broken treaties in the U.S. and about Indigenous sovereignty movements to correct for past injustices. Read the American Indian Movement's "Trail of Broken Treaties 20 Point Position Paper" **here**. Read about the Native Hawaiian sovereignty movement **here**. Read Suzan Shown Harjo's ***Nation to Nation: Treaties Between the United States and American Indian Nations***.
- Read the **United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples**. The United States was one of four nations to vote against the declaration when it was first adopted in 2007. It was the last of the four to reverse that in 2010.
- Where can a Truth and Reconciliation process lead? Check out the **calls to action** that emerged from Canada's commission.

- Consider that the 2010 Census listed the percentage of urban Native people at 71%. Many Indigenous people are among those seeking or building community in cities.

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS AND TAKE ACTION

- Find out if there are active Native groups or organizations in or near your community. Learn about their work and see how you can support them.
- Be in touch with local Native community members to discern how best to introduce the practice of acknowledgment and explore how that might lead to further dialogue and collaboration.
- Look around and ask yourself: are there Native folks present at your events? On your team? On your board? If not, what would it take to begin building those relationships? How might you move from acknowledgment into relationship? If your role involves programming at a cultural or educational institution, how might you ensure that the programming itself represents a commitment to Native voices, stories, and perspectives?
- Follow Indigenous leadership on efforts to resist destruction of land and life. Read this powerful **call to action** from Indigenous Women Rising.

A FEW ORGANIZATIONS TO CHECK OUT:

- **Native Arts and Cultures Foundation.** Expose yourself to the work of Native artists, poets, musicians, authors, filmmakers working in community.
- **Indigenous Environmental Network**, "an alliance of Indigenous Peoples whose Shared Mission is to Protect the Sacredness of Earth Mother from contamination & exploitation by Respecting and Adhering to Indigenous Knowledge and Natural Law."
- **National Congress of American Indians**: NCAI "founded in 1944, is the oldest, largest and most representative American Indian and Alaska Native organization serving the broad interests of tribal governments and communities."
- **First People's Fund** works to "honor and support the Collective Spirit® of First Peoples artists and culture bearers."
- **Vision Maker Media** "empowers and engages Native People to tell stories."
- **Cultural Survival** "advocates for Indigenous Peoples' rights and supports Indigenous communities' self-determination, cultures and political resilience."
- **Endangered Language Alliance**: NYC-based organization that "documents and describes underdescribed and endangered languages, educating a larger public and collaborating with communities."
- **Indian Country Media Network**: Source for Native news. On hiatus, but archive still accessible.

DOWNLOAD ART OR MAKE YOUR OWN!

Imagine going to a local coffee shop, music venue, grocery store, or even town hall, and finding a sign on the wall acknowledging traditional lands. Sound far-fetched? It doesn't have to be! As part of this campaign to #HonorNativeLands, we partnered with several artists to create downloadable signs that you can customize and post in your community. Signs and posters are available for download from the **Honor Native Land Public Folder.**

You are also invited to make your own signs or posters. Consider partnering with local artists and a local printshop to make a customized set of acknowledgment posters for your community.

SPREAD THE WORD

Share the guide and call to action. In the **Honor Native Land Public Folder** there are sample social media posts, signs and other materials that you can use to spread the word about this campaign. Use the hashtag #HonorNativeLand.

TAKE THE PLEDGE

We urge organizations, collectives, institutions, and agencies to publicly commit to practicing traditional Native land acknowledgment. To stand and be counted and to inspire others with your commitment, take the pledge **here**.

ABOUT THE USDAC

The U.S. Department of Arts and Culture (USDAC) is a people-powered department–a grassroots action network inciting creativity and social imagination to shape a culture of empathy, equity, and belonging. Since 2014, the USDAC has engaged more than 25,000 artists, activists, and allies in 40+ states in arts-based dialogues and actions. By creating opportunities for learning, connection, and collective action at the local and national level, the USDAC works toward a society that affirms the right to culture; values each community's heritage, contributions, and aspirations; and dismantles all barriers to love and justice. For more information and to get involved visit: **www.usdac.us.**

BE IN TOUCH

Did this guide inspire you to action? Do you already have stories of success or challenges implementing acknowledgment as a practice at your organization or institution? Do you want to strategize about how to spread the practice of acknowledgment in your region or create a campaign to introduce acknowledgment as official policy in your town or city?

We'd love to hear from you. Drop us a line at hello@usdac.us.

"Auto Immune Response" by William Wilson (Diné)