

GUIDE TO INDIGENOUS LAND AND TERRITORIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS FOR CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS

What is an Indigenous Land or Territorial Acknowledgement?

An Indigenous Land or Territorial Acknowledgement is a statement that recognizes the Indigenous peoples who have been dispossessed from the homelands and territories upon which an institution was built and currently occupies and operates in. For some, an Indigenous Land or Territorial Acknowledgement might be an unfamiliar practice, but it is a common protocol within Indigenous communities in the United States and is a standard practice in both Australia and Canada. The terms “Land” and “Territorial” are not necessarily interchangeable, and the decision as to their use should be specific and local, pertaining to those Indigenous people who are being acknowledged as well as to those legacies and responsibilities of an institution that are also being acknowledged. In this guide, a preference for land acknowledgement is made in keeping with advocacy acknowledging Lenapehoking as Lenape homeland. Within cultural institutions, these statements can be adopted in various ways. However it is vital that they be spoken as a verbal statement given at the beginning of programs or events. In addition, they can also be expressed through a text panel or plaque, and an acknowledgement on an institutional website.

Why are Indigenous Land and Territorial Acknowledgements Important?

The teaching of U.S. history, in schools, museums, and the media, has left out many voices and difficult truths in order to create an idealized nationalistic identity. The displacement of Indigenous peoples and the devastating effect that forced relocation has had on these communities has been largely hidden within the nationalist narratives. While many Indigenous nations have treaties with the United States government that designate land ownership, most only have rights to occupancy. Often the land on which Indigenous nations and communities reside is not the land to which they have ancestral ties, as many have experienced dispossession and displacement through colonization. However, the connection to homelands has endured by means of multiple and ongoing Indigenous strategies of resistance to settler colonialism. This connection is often central to cultural identity and worldview. The examples of Standing Rock and the Dakota Access Pipeline and the shrinking of the Bears Ears National Monument demonstrate that relationships to place and identity persist. The settler colonial state continues to struggle in the recognition of inherent Indigenous sovereignty and respect for homelands.

Why Cultural Institutions?

Indigenous Land or Territorial Acknowledgements pertain to all places, especially to libraries, archives, museums, and universities, because it is their ethical obligation as educational institutions to create truthful and factual representations. These acknowledgements have an educational function that makes them universally applicable, regardless of an institution’s particular focus. They are about respecting and recognizing Indigenous peoples, and their relationships to land through the protocols of naming people, elders, ancestors, and the times of past to future. Acknowledgement statements confront institutional legacies as agents of colonialism. Cultural institutions have utilized deeply colonial methods to develop mainstream representations of the “other” as territory, in addition to perpetuating and reinforcing destructive colonial narratives. Further, because of the authority of cultural institutions, these narratives have been accepted as truth, informing policies that negatively affect Indigenous peoples. The ongoing effects of settler colonialism need to be addressed.

Suggestions for Creating your Land or Territorial Acknowledgement

Indigenous Land or Territorial Acknowledgements should be motivated by a genuine respect for Indigenous nations and communities. Reaching out to local Indigenous communities to ask how they would like to be acknowledged is crucial. This is the most respectful approach as it recognizes the sovereignty of Indigenous nations to define their own terms. Acknowledgements are a collaborative process to be formed through continuous relationships with Indigenous people. An acknowledgment begins as a spoken embodied action. It is also appropriate for institutions to adopt material versions (i.e., plaque or text panel). This practice should be integrated by institutional staff into the protocol of everyday proceedings, such as board meetings, gallery talks, and larger events. It is important and meaningful to have institutional representatives acknowledge the institutions' legacy and to indicate reckoning and a commitment to change within the institution.

Land or territorial acknowledgement statements can take many forms. The following is an example of an acknowledgement statement that could be used within a museum setting:

We are gathered on the unceded land of the () peoples. I ask you to join me in acknowledging the () community, their elders both past and present, as well as future generations. (Name of institution) also acknowledges that it was founded upon exclusions and erasures of many Indigenous peoples, including those on whose land this institution is located. This acknowledgement demonstrates a commitment to beginning the process of working to dismantle the ongoing legacies of settler colonialism.

Cultural institutions have an obligation to support ongoing education as well as accurate and responsible representation. By harnessing institutional voice, there is a capacity to effect change into the future far beyond institutional walls.

Resources:

- This guide was designed to complement the USDAC's extensive #HonorNativeLand Guide, which can be found here: <https://usdac.us/nativeland/>.
- If you aren't sure which community or communities to acknowledge, <https://Native-Land.ca> is a great initial resource.
- This guide builds upon the important work that the Lenape Center, American Indian Community House, Rick Chavolla, Emily Johnson, and the New Red Order (NRO) have been doing with regard to land acknowledgements in Lenapehoking.
- Please reference the School for Advanced Research's "Museums+Communities: Guidelines for Collaboration": <https://sarweb.org/guidelinesforcollaboration/>.
- Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's article, "Decolonization is not a metaphor" can help to contextualize this practice within a larger decolonization framework <https://decolonization.org/index.php/des/article/view/18630>.

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For further resources and information see: www.landacknowledgements.org

Please send any comments or questions to LandAcknowledgementGuide@gmail.com