

BEYOND LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT: A GUIDE

Native Governance Center held an event on moving beyond land acknowledgment on August 25, 2021. The event featured Nikki Pitre (Center for Native American Youth), Joye Braun (Indigenous Environmental Network), President Robert Larsen (Lower Sioux Community), and Michelle Vassel and David Cobb (Wiyot Honor Tax). This guide is based on content contributed during our event; we are grateful to our presenters for sharing their wisdom with us.

WHAT IS INDIGENOUS LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT?

Indigenous land acknowledgment is an effort to recognize the Indigenous past, present, and future of a particular location and to understand our own place within that relationship. Usually, land acknowledgments take the form of written and/or verbal statements. It's becoming more and more common to see land acknowledgments delivered at conferences, community gatherings, places of worship, concerts and festivals, etc.

Our organization previously released a guide to Indigenous land acknowledgment. We recommend that land acknowledgments include certain components, such as research on Indigenous place names and concrete action steps for supporting Indigenous people. [Check out our guide](#) for more on how to craft a land acknowledgment statement.

WHY CAN LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT BE PROBLEMATIC?

Sometimes, when crafting land acknowledgment statements, non-Indigenous folks ask Indigenous people and communities to do free emotional labor. When we feel unsure and anxious about something, it's easy to impulsively reach out for help before doing our own research. Anxiety happens: we've all been there. But, it's important to put those anxious thoughts aside and do your homework. Spend the time that's required to craft a thoughtful statement.



Emotional labor is the "invisible and often undervalued work involved in keeping other people comfortable and happy." (Source: *The New York Times*)

Emotional labor is problematic because it's time consuming and can place additional stress on Indigenous people. In addition to normal employment and family obligations, Indigenous people are working to heal their traumas, learn their languages, and support their nations.





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WHY CAN LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT BE PROBLEMATIC? (CONTINUED)

They don't want to spend their free time working as unpaid land acknowledgment consultants. If you've done all you can on your own and decide to ask for help on a land acknowledgment, offer fair compensation up front. And, be prepared to be told "no."

Aside from the emotional labor piece, land acknowledgments can have unintended negative consequences. Our organization has received hundreds of inquiries from folks wanting help with their land acknowledgment statements. Almost all of these inquiries have focused on land acknowledgment verbiage, rather than the all-important action steps for supporting Indigenous communities. **Every moment spent agonizing over land acknowledgment wording is time that could be used to actually support Indigenous people.**

It's easy for land acknowledgments to become yet another form of optical allyship. They often lack a call to action and next steps. Without these components, land acknowledgments are just empty words. They become an excuse for folks to feel good and move on with their lives without actually contributing anything to the community. As President Robert Larsen of the Lower Sioux Indian Community puts it, "An apology or an acknowledgment is one thing, but *what are you going to do next?*"

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO GO BEYOND LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT?

Instead of spending time on a land acknowledgment statement, we recommend creating an **action plan** highlighting the concrete steps you plan to take to support Indigenous communities into the future. Similar to a land acknowledgment, your plan will include information and research on the land you occupy, but it will primarily focus on action. Is it wrong to write a land acknowledgment statement? No. But if you do, your statement should highlight a strong call to action and action steps; it should encourage your audience to create their own steps, too.

When writing your action plan, it's still important to look into the Indigenous past, present, and future of the land you occupy. Writing an action plan instead of a land acknowledgment statement does not mean you're off the hook for doing your own research. In fact, you'll likely conduct just as much or more research to create an action plan that's **specific, accurate, and impactful.**



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WHAT STEPS SHOULD I TAKE TO CREATE MY ACTION PLAN?

Do a self-assessment. Before creating an action plan to support Indigenous people and nations, it's important to analyze what you're already doing. Are any of your current behaviors causing harm to Indian Country? If so, it's possible to change your habits to prevent future damage. Read [our self-assessment guide](#) on our website for more. Hold yourself accountable for changing your habits in your action plan.

Do a resource assessment. What resources can you personally provide to support Indigenous people and nations? Don't be afraid to get creative here.

- Can you set aside *money* each month for a recurring donation to an Indigenous organization?
- Do you have *time* to show up to an Indigenous-led protest or help create a voluntary land tax program in your area?
- Do you have *land* that you want to return to Indigenous people, either now or in the future?
- If you're creating a plan on behalf of an organization or educational institution, do you have *tickets, admission, tuition, or entry fees* that you can give away to Indigenous people?

Do your research. We recommend investigating the following questions to inform your plan. These questions will help you better understand what's happening in your area and how you can help. (This is not an exhaustive list: create your own research questions, too!)

- What is the Indigenous history of the land I occupy? Can I find any Indigenous place names for locations or landmarks in my area?
- What are the names of some prominent Indigenous people who currently live in my community?
- What Native nation is located closest to me? How do I pronounce the nation's name? What projects is the nation working on? Who are their elected leaders? What are their goals for the future?
- What Native-led organizations and nonprofits operate in my area?
- Do any voluntary land tax programs already exist in my community?
- Are there groups of non-Native folks currently convening in my area to hold each other accountable on taking action?
- What is my city doing to support Indigenous communities? Is my place of worship, club, gym, etc. doing anything to take action?
- Are there Native-led demonstrations happening near me to protest Treaty Rights violations or projects threatening Native lands and lifeways?



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WHAT STEPS SHOULD I TAKE TO CREATE MY ACTION PLAN? (CONTINUED)

Outline concrete plan steps with specific, measurable actions. Look for points of alignment between your resource assessment and your research. For example, you might have indicated during your resource assessment that you have time to show up to an Indigenous-led protest movement.

And during your research, you might have discovered that community members are currently convening to protest the installation of a new pipeline on Indigenous land. Use this alignment to create an action step. For example, "I will attend the upcoming Line 3 pipeline demonstration at the Minnesota State Capitol and attend at least three other related events per year." Your steps should make it immediately clear how and when you plan to take action. Sample action steps could look like the following:

- I will set up a monthly recurring donation of \$25 to X Native-led organization in my area starting on X date.
- I will follow five new Indigenous-led pipeline resistance organizations on social media and commit to attending at least one demonstration before the end of the year.
- I will challenge my local park system to offer free season passes to Indigenous people and reach out to my park board member to start the conversation within the next month.
- I will stop buying jewelry from culturally appropriative brands immediately and instead support Native-owned businesses.

Go public. Don't keep your plan to yourself. Share your action steps with your friends, family, and neighbors. Put them on Instagram. Tell your community that you are committed to supporting Indigenous people, and challenge people in your life to create their own plan.

Keep your action plan somewhere handy. Your action plan doesn't belong in a drawer. Print it out and put it on your fridge. Store it in the notes section of your phone. Put it somewhere that will help you see it regularly.

Reflect on your progress. Your action plan is an ongoing commitment. Our lives constantly change, and so will your relevant actions. Reflect on your progress from time to time. How many of your action steps have you actually completed? What have been the biggest barriers to carrying out your plan? Are you making any life changes that will make it difficult to continue executing your plan as written? If so, restart your self-assessment and resource assessment, and outline new steps that work for you.



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WHAT STEPS SHOULD I TAKE TO CREATE MY ACTION PLAN? (CONTINUED)

Stay humble. This work is ongoing; your learning does not stop at your action plan. Know that all of us have room to grow and more to learn. If someone calls you in (or out) on your plan, accept their words gracefully and use the moment as a learning opportunity.

CAN YOU EXPLAIN SOME SPECIFIC ACTION STEP TYPES IN MORE DETAIL?

In the above guidelines, we mentioned voluntary land taxes, Indigenous land return, and showing up to Indigenous-led protest movements as potential action steps. Below, we'll share some best practices and next steps for implementing these steps.

VOLUNTARY LAND TAXES

Voluntary land taxes, otherwise referred to as honor taxes, function similarly to paying rent or a home mortgage. Our rent and mortgage payments give us access to living space; voluntary land taxes recognize our access to stolen Indigenous land. Each month (or on a set time interval), land tax participants pay an amount that goes directly to Native nations and/or organizations in their area. Some land tax programs are run by non-Indigenous residents working in partnership with Native nations and organizations; others are operated by Native-led nonprofits working toward Indigenous land return. Land taxes are not required and are entirely voluntary: it's up to program participants to determine how much and how often they'd like to contribute.

Voluntary land taxes are important because they support Tribal sovereignty. Michelle Vassel, Wiyot Tribal Administrator, explains the importance of the Wiyot Honor Tax: "[The Wiyot Tribe] is a government, just like your municipal government, just like your state government, just like the federal government. We do all of the same functions. But, we don't have the taxation base to be able to carry them out. We have no casino or other form of economic development. Everything that we do is based on writing grants. And whatever is popular in the grant world, on any given day, is what gets funded. That doesn't affirm our sovereignty. We often don't have choices when our money comes from people who tell us what the best way is. By contributing to the Wiyot Honor Tax, you're honoring our sovereignty and ability to make choices on our own to do the best things. No strings attached." (Read [our article](#) to learn more about why voluntary land taxes are important and the programs that already exist.)



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CAN YOU EXPLAIN SOME SPECIFIC ACTION STEP TYPES IN MORE DETAIL? (CONTINUED)

If you're thinking of setting up a voluntary land tax program in your area, we recommend doing the following:

Determine if a program already exists: There's no sense in duplicating efforts. Check to make sure a program doesn't already exist in your area before starting your own. If one does exist, focus on what you can do to amplify the program. For example, ask your friends and family to join you in contributing. Challenge your company to publicly commit to paying a portion of its gross income each year to the land tax program.

Get Consent: The most important thing to consider when starting a voluntary land tax program in your area is consent. Before you launch your program, discuss your plans with the Native nations or organizations to whom you intend to donate the tax proceeds. Request their official permission, and come to the conversation with a clear outline for how your program will work. Don't ask Native people for help with the initial time investment required to build a program. It's very possible that a Native nation or organization will not want to participate in a voluntary land tax program: that's ok! Respect their wishes.

Know who to contact: If you want to partner with a Native nation, for example, go directly to their Tribal council leaders. Elected Tribal council leaders make laws for and govern their sovereign nations. They're in the best position to consent to receiving donations for their nation. Follow the nation's guidelines for contacting Tribal council members. Some nations request that all meeting requests go through the Tribal council's executive assistant. You can usually find this information on a nation's website.

Be transparent: When advertising your program, be transparent by mentioning that you've received permission from your chosen beneficiaries. It'll set an example for others looking to start similar efforts and give your program participants confidence that their voluntary taxes will be put to good use. The Honor Tax Project recommends donating all proceeds and avoiding using proceeds to fund the program itself. If you're not using the voluntary tax proceeds to support Native people, you've defeated the purpose of your program.

Are you looking for advice on starting a voluntary land tax/honor tax program in your area? Our panelist, David Cobb, has offered to serve as a resource to folks wanting help and information. Email him: davidkcobb@gmail.com.



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CAN YOU EXPLAIN SOME SPECIFIC ACTION STEP TYPES IN MORE DETAIL? (CONTINUED)

INDIGENOUS LAND RETURN

More and more local governments, organizations, and individuals are returning land to Native nations. For example, the Minnesota Historical Society recently returned 115 acres of land back to the Lower Sioux Indian Community. The Lower Sioux Indian Community fought for many years to make this land transfer a reality.

Are you considering returning land but don't know where to start? Here are a few tips:

Do your research: Determine which Native nation is located in closest proximity to the land you occupy. Learn more about this nation; don't assume it's similar to other Native nations. You may consider looking into successful land transfers involving this nation, if applicable. Who was involved? What steps did they take to return land?

Learn about your options: Land return can be complicated. Learn as much as you can about your options, and seek advice from trained professionals. This [guide](#) from the Sustainable Economies Law Center (SELC) is a good starting point. (It encourages interested parties to seek individualized tax, legal, and estate planning advice before proceeding.)

Reach out respectfully: Once you've done your research and learned about your options, try reaching out to the nation's Tribal Historic Preservation Officer (THPO) to start the conversation around land return. (Try searching for "THPO" and the name of the nation to which you'd like to donate to find contact information.) Respectfully seek consent from a particular nation on your land return proposal. It's ultimately up to them to decide whether they'd like to receive your land.

SHOWING UP TO PROTESTS

Joye Braun, national pipelines campaign organizer for the Indigenous Environmental Network, notes, "Wherever you live in the so-called United States, within 200 miles, you're going to find a water fight. Think about that. Whether it's a pipeline or uranium minimum or mountain top removal--you are going to find a water fight."





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CAN YOU EXPLAIN SOME SPECIFIC ACTION STEP TYPES IN MORE DETAIL? (CONTINUED)

How do you respectfully show up to support Indigenous people fighting for their land and their future? Joye offers the following tips:

Remember that it's not about you: "We're not there to tell your story," Joye explains. "You're there to tell our story. You're there to lift up frontline voices." You may feel tempted to share your own ideas about a particular struggle, but when you attend an Indigenous-led protest, it's best to put your personal narratives aside. Find the Indigenous voices at the frontlines, listen to them, and amplify them.

Don't leave your trash behind: "I'm not just talking about physical trash. I'm talking about emotional and mental trash. I'm talking about showing up at a place and not causing a lot of chaos and drama," Joye notes. This work is stressful. Bringing your own emotional conflicts to a protest only makes the situation harder for organizers.

Don't be a savior: Joye explains, "A lot of times, people will show up, and they'll say, I've got all of these ideas, and we're going to do it this way. Being a savior is not what we need. We need you to show up and take that arrest." Indigenous folks do not need saving. Instead, they need you to put your body on the line for their struggle.

Do your own learning about the issues at hand: "We go to countless hearings," Joye says. "We have to learn so much about the Army Corps of engineers and various permits, for example. Learn a little bit." We've said it before, and we'll say it again: do your homework!

Do what's asked of you: Joye tells us, "Find the Indigenous or BIPOC voices speaking from the frontlines, and look for what they're asking you to do. If they're asking you to send an email to the Army Corps of Engineers, do it. If they want you to do solidarity actions in your hometown, even if that means showing up by yourself and holding up a sign, do it." It's simple: frontline groups know best what they need. Focus on their specific requests.

WHAT ARE SOME OTHER ACTION STEP IDEAS BESIDES VOLUNTARY LAND TAXES, LAND RETURN, AND SHOWING UP TO PROTESTS?

- For colleges and universities: make tuition free for Native students.



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WHAT ARE SOME OTHER ACTION STEP IDEAS BESIDES VOLUNTARY LAND TAXES, LAND RETURN, AND SHOWING UP TO PROTESTS? (CONTINUED)

- For organizations and corporations: hire Native people for high-level leadership positions.
- For vacation home owners: donate a multi-night stay at your home to a frontline Indigenous organizer in need of rest and recovery.
- Set up a recurring donation to a Native-led organization.
- Support Native-led efforts to remove harmful mascots, place names, and statues.
- Purchase products and services from Native-owned businesses.
- Donate to individual Native people via mutual aid groups.

CAN YOU SHOW ME A SAMPLE ACTION PLAN?

This is a sample action plan written by a fictitious person living in St. Paul, Minnesota:

I live in St. Paul near Wakpá Thánka (the Mississippi river), not far from Bdoté, the place where the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers meet. Bdoté, along with Bde Wakan (present-day Lake Mille Lacs), are central to Dakota creation stories. There are many other sacred Dakota sites near St. Paul, including Taku Wakan Tipi (Carver's Cave) and Eháŋna Wičháhapi (Indian Mounds Park burial mounds).

Mni Sota Makoce (Minnesota) is the homeland of the Dakota people. The Dakota have lived here for many thousands of years. Anishinaabe people reside here, too, and reached their current homelands after following the megis shell to the food that grows on water (manoomin, or wild rice). Indigenous people from other Native nations also reside in Minnesota and have made innumerable contributions to our region.

I'm committed to supporting Indigenous people and nations in my home state and beyond. To do this, I've outlined several ways I plan to take action on an ongoing basis:

- Starting now, I will make a recurring monthly donation of \$25 to Native Governance Center, a Native-led organization working to strengthen sovereignty in Mni Sota Makoce, North Dakota, and South Dakota.
- I will attend at least five educational events per year hosted by Native-led organizations. I will continue to educate myself about important issues in Indian Country.
- I will attend an upcoming Line 3 demonstration hosted by an Indigenous-led organization and show up in a good way. I will research other water fights in my area impacting Indigenous communities and attend demonstrations.



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WHAT ARE SOME OTHER ACTION STEP IDEAS BESIDES VOLUNTARY LAND TAXES, LAND RETURN, AND SHOWING UP TO PROTESTS? (CONTINUED)

- I own a lake home in northern Minnesota. I will reach out to a frontline Indigenous organization and offer to donate a three-night stay to an organizer in need of rest and recovery.

I will frequently revise, improve, and strengthen this action plan as I continue to conduct research and receive feedback from people in my community. I will share this action plan with my family, friends, colleagues, and online networks and encourage others to create their own.

Planning to share your action plan on social media? Give us a shout-out (@nativegov), and we'll repost it!

WHAT ADDITIONAL RESOURCES SHOULD I EXPLORE?

VOLUNTARY LAND TAXES/HONOR TAXES

- [‘Symbolic rent’: Seattle residents pay reparations to Native American tribe](#)
- [These Indigenous Women Are Reclaiming Stolen Land in the Bay Area](#)
- [Native American ‘land taxes’: a step on the roadmap for reparations](#)
- [Shuumi Land Tax](#)
- [You’re already on stolen land. You might as well pay rent.](#)
- [The honor tax project: start an honor tax](#)

INDIGENOUS LAND RETURN

- [Options for transferring land](#)
- [Land Reparations and Indigenous Solidarity Toolkit](#)
- [Tribal Historic Preservation Offices in Minnesota](#)
- [MNHS Transfers Portion of Lower Sioux Historic Site Back to the Lower Sioux Indian Community](#)
- [California Tribe regains island it calls center of universe](#)

INDIGENOUS LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT/RESEARCH

- [Native Land](#)
- [A Guide to Indigenous Land Acknowledgment](#)

