



BEFORE YOU READ: What does it mean to acknowledge something? What are some examples of acknowledgments you make in your life?

The Land is Our Mother

In Native communities, we live and breathe the land all the time. The land is our Mother and is a gift, just like life is a gift. At all of our gatherings – our powwows, our spiritual events, our meetings – we show gratitude for the land, air, and water. We see ourselves as being in relationship with the land. We are part of it. We protect it.

Acknowledging the Loss of Our Land

Recently, non-Native people have started opening their events or meetings by acknowledging that they are on land that was stolen from Indigenous

The land was stolen from Native people.

people. For thousands of years before European settlers came, Indigenous people took care of this land. We lived in right relationship with the land. But the land was stolen from Native people. We were forced to sign treaties, so those treaties are illegitimate. Also, the idea of “selling” land

was a foreign concept to us. We were never the “owners” of the land, so how could we sell it?

Because of wars, false treaties, and disease, Native people were killed or forced to relocate. European settlers developed the land. They altered the land, the air, and the water. They controlled the land in a way that was different from our cultural practices. When you acknowledge the land, make sure to include the fact that, as we lost our land, we lost our people and our culture. When non-Native people acknowledge the land, they are acknowledging all this suffering that tribal citizens have gone through since colonizers came.

Honorable and Maybe Also Hurtful

If you are non-Native, you should be aware that it is a very emotional thing to acknowledge the land. For Native people, it’s a double-edged sword to witness your land acknowledgment. On the one hand, you are honoring Native people and seeing the struggles we have been through. On the other hand, you are talking about the loss of our land, and we have limited tools to get our land back. You are talking about something that we are still struggling with. Be sensitive to how you are awakening an important predicament.

If you are planning to do a land acknowledgment, you might think you are doing something honorable, but it might be hurtful. If there are Native people at your meeting, you should ask permission to do the land acknowledgment. Also, you should let Native members of the community know that you're doing this.

Awareness Is Not Enough

If you are non-Native and you are thinking about doing land acknowledgments, that means you are increasing your awareness of Native issues. But awareness by itself has never done us any good. There's always an opportunity to do more. Take responsibility. Reflect on the historical abandonment of Native people and see what you can do about it today. Acknowledgments should be more than words. We are one people with one Mother Earth.

Native people have a saying, "Our existence is our resistance." As limited as a Land Acknowledgment might be, it can remind everyone of our existence. It can be a rightful and respectful act.

Michelle Hughes is a member of the Mashpee Wampanoag.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. Explain in your own words what it means to acknowledge the land.
2. If you are not Native American, what should you be aware of and what should you do before you Acknowledge the Land?
3. Visit native-land.ca to find out what Native land you are on. Then write your own Land Acknowledgment. Before you start, read the Land Acknowledgment by Michelle Hughes (in the box on the right), and use it as a model. Or search online for other models.
4. Consider starting your class or opening an event at your program by reading your Land Acknowledgment. Before you do this, however, be sure to ask permission of Native people who are present. And reach out to Native members in your community to let them know what you are doing.

Land Acknowledgment

by Michelle Hughes

As a Mashpee Wampanoag woman, I acknowledge that we are on a great land, the land of our ancestors. Our ancestors taught us to show gratitude for the land. However, we have lost so much of it. The Wampanoag people used to have 69 tribes in Massachusetts and Rhode Island. Now there are only three surviving Wampanoag tribes, and we have less than 1% of our original territory. In addition to losing our land, we have been hurt as a people. The trauma from so much damage travels through the generations.



Colonizing now happens in the form of State and Federal agencies that still control our land. Indigenous people still have to fight for our existence on Mother Earth. Recently our tribe, the Mashpee Wampanoag, have had to fight back as the U.S. government tries to take away our right to sovereignty on our reservation. We seek land for clean water, food, wood, and economic development.

We are a protector of the lands. We feel a great obligation to give back. When we are stewards of the land, we take care of it, and it takes care of our people and our families. As a Mashpee Wampanoag, I thank you for acknowledging the land with me. Please continue to do so as you walk sacredly in life.