

The 5 Keys to Exceptional Land Acknowledgements

If you've attended an event in Canada in the last five years, chances are you've heard someone holding the microphone say something along the lines of, "Before we get started, we'd like to take this moment to acknowledge the lands we're gathered on today are the traditional territory of..." before the names of a bunch of Indigenous peoples.

Land Acknowledgements. Most of us believe that they're important, and that we should absolutely do them often and with sincerity. Especially here in Alberta where Treaties 4, 6, 7, 8 and 10 and various Métis communities create many layers of places people call home. But as they become an expected item in agendas for events and meetings, some are pausing to ask difficult questions: Why are we doing this? What is the goal? How do we make sure that this doesn't become something meaningless?

At Naheyawin, we primarily provide guidance and tools to non-Indigenous organizations working to reach their diversity and inclusion goals, so this is a conversation we anticipate having with the majority of our clients. As our contribution to the Alberta Emerald Foundation's *Tell Your Story* campaign, we wanted to provide you with actionable insights into how you can tell *this* part of your story with an exceptional land acknowledgement.

KEY 1: KNOW THE STORY.

It's always a good idea to start at the beginning. What exactly are land acknowledgements and where did they come from?

Pausing to recognize relationships to the land has been done on Turtle Island (or North America) by Indigenous peoples since time immemorial. This practice has been in place for such a long time as the stewardship of and connection to the land are considered sacred parts of the identities of most, if not all, Indigenous groups. Often, these moments of pause would include mention of any Indigenous treaties that were in place between groups, helping call to mind the spirit and intent of those agreements.

Today, acknowledgements have become popularized among non-Indigenous peoples in Canada as a largely grassroots effort to demonstrate their commitment to meeting the calls to action in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's final report; by making space for non-Indigenous peoples to recognize Indigenous peoples' historical and contemporary inherent rights and connection to the land, as well as their relationship with the land and the benefits and responsibilities they gain through that relationship.

KEY 2: BRING YOURSELF INTO THE RELATIONSHIP, TOO.

Understanding the history and nature of Land Acknowledgements illuminates to many that they, too, are supposed to be a part of the story. But what does that mean?

The Indigenous research method called "self-location" is a practice of acknowledging one's position within a greater context, heritage, educational background, and various personal and professional life experiences. At Naheyawin, we refer to this as "finding your place in the circle." Engaging in this ongoing practice is a way to regularly remind ourselves of our own, very specific perspectives and creates space for the perspectives of others so that we don't see different worldviews and beliefs as threatening to our own.

A land acknowledgement is a wonderful opportunity to express that self-location journey. Take time to ensure that your organization's unique vision and values are a part of the statement so that each delivery of the acknowledgement is a real and special reminder to yourself as well as all those listening that we are *all* in relationship with the land.

KEY 3: USE ENDONYMS AND PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE.

Indigenous groups, just like other communities, have named themselves in their languages; a name referred to as an "endonym." It's helpful to remember these endonyms exist when you are seeking out the names of Indigenous peoples who have contemporary or ancient relationships to the lands you're acknowledging. A great example of this is the word *Cree*, which is a name that was coined by Europeans in reference to the peoples who use the self-designated name, *nehiyawak*.

A useful tool to help you find the endonyms of the groups who have a relationship to the lands you're acknowledging is the [Native Land](#) website. Simply navigate to your location, and presto!

Once you've selected the communities you'd like to acknowledge, make sure you practice pronunciation. There are many tools and resources available online to help you do so.

Something to consider in your research is the ongoing discourse among Indigenous scholars about the concept of "traditional territory" as some argue that the term is a colonial construct that does not resonate with Indigenous ways of thinking about land and land stewardship. Also, it brings up the tricky question of *when* we are defining who the traditional inhabitants of lands are. 500 years ago? 1,000? 5,000? Just like the rest of the world, Turtle Island has not been a static place.

In our work at Naheyawin, we frequently suggest expanding the peoples mentioned in acknowledgements to include contemporary peoples that make their homes in that place today.

KEY 4: DON'T SWEAT THE SCRIPT

When it comes to delivering your acknowledgement, some people have strong feelings about whether or not to use a script. On one hand some people find it lacks sincerity if you're reading from a paper, while on the other people have shared they feel preoccupied with remembering the words if they've tried to memorize the statement.

Our opinion? Whatever helps you connect to the story you're a part of and bring people along with you is the right way to go. Presence is the priority.

KEY 5: CHANGE IT.

After you've put in the work to create your acknowledgement, be prepared to let it evolve as you do.

We encourage organizations to think of their land acknowledgements as an artifact of their journey rather than a destination, and that means revisiting the statement regularly to consider whether or not it still resonates with their journey as a whole. For some, this means a yearly review while for others, it's something more organic. Go with the strategy that you believe you can sustainably maintain as an organization.

BONUS: CONSIDER MODULARITY

One thing we're seeing organizations start to do is take a more modular approach to their acknowledgements. An organization-wide statement is prepared, but it's coupled with open space for each individual in their organization to make their own as well. Often, these individual statements include a self-location process for the individual in the form of a story about where they come from, and an update on where they're at on their journey of engaging with the land and all peoples in connection to it.

While more time consuming to manage, this approach helps to foster ownership of those statements among staff, deepening the connection and strengthening the organization's internal culture.

NEED MORE HELP?

We hope this article has been helpful in creating (or upgrading) your land acknowledgement, but if you need more support, don't hesitate to reach out to us.