

Backgrounder: Indigenous Peoples & Land Acknowledgment

In the United States today, there are more than five hundred federally recognized Indigenous nations comprising nearly three million people. These people are the descendants of some fifteen million Native people who once inhabited this land.

Indigenous people of the Americas shaped life in the Western Hemisphere for millennia. When European colonists arrived in North America in the 1600s, this land was filled with diverse, long-established societies.

Over the next three centuries, European settlers and their governments pursued a program of genocide and land theft against Native peoples across the continent, and denied them the right to govern themselves.

Throughout this history, and continuing today, Indigenous peoples have fought for their survival and their cultures. Historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz describes the “culture of resistance” that has allowed Native peoples to survive and create a legacy: “Native people continue to fight to maintain the integrity and viability of Indigenous societies,” she writes. “American Indian history is one of cultural persistence, creative adaptation, renewal, and resilience.”

Most non-Indigenous Americans know very little, and are taught very little, about those who originally lived and thrived on the lands we now occupy – or about Native lives and cultures today. [Researchers](#) have found that:

- The majority of Americans know little to nothing about Native Americans.
- Many Americans are not clear how many Native peoples still exist.
- Invisibility is one of the biggest barriers Native peoples face in advocating for tribal sovereignty, equity, and social justice.
- Invisibility, erasure of history, stereotypes, and false narratives underlie the stories being told about Native people today.

Fortunately, surveys also find that most Americans want to change: They want to learn more about Native cultures; they support Native positions on most issues; and they support significant changes to K-12 curricula to ensure that accurate Native history and culture is taught in schools.

Historian Jack Forbes, of [Powhatan-Renapé](#) and [Lenape](#) descent, maintained that “while living persons are not responsible for what their ancestors did, they are responsible for the society they live in, which is a product of that past.”

Learning about and acknowledging the people on whose land we live is one way we can begin to take responsibility for our country’s ongoing injustices against Native peoples. And it is a step that can be mind-opening and enriching for us.

In Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, school days and meetings — and even sports games — often begin with a **land acknowledgment**: a formal statement that pays tribute to the original inhabitants of the land. The purpose of these land acknowledgment statements is to show respect for Indigenous peoples and recognize their enduring relationship to the land. Practicing acknowledgment — at events, in our writings, and elsewhere, can also raise awareness about the suppressed histories of Native peoples.

“There have always been Indigenous peoples in the spaces we call home, and there always will be,” Kanyon Sayers-Roods, a Mutsun Ohlone activist in Northern California, told [Teen Vogue](#). “The acknowledgment process is about asking, What does it mean to live in a post-colonial world? What did it take for us to get here? And how can we be accountable to our part in history?”

Land acknowledgment statements can be short, simply citing the name or names of the tribes that inhabited the land, or they can include more extensive information.

Morningside Center for Teaching Responsibility adopted [this land acknowledgment statement](#) for the work it does in New York City.