

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: WHAT THEY ARE & WHY WE DO THEM

What are land acknowledgments?

Land acknowledgements are a way of recognizing the relationship that exists between Indigenous Peoples (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit) and their traditional territories, and colonial attempts to destroy those relationships. Making a land acknowledgement is a small but important first step in telling the truth and reconciling the relationships between settlers and Indigenous Peoples.

Land acknowledgments are an Indigenous protocol, and all settlers have a responsibility to reflect on what it means to acknowledge the land we all reside on, along with the history and legacy of colonialism.

Why do we acknowledge the land?

By verbally recognizing the territory you reside on, you are showing appreciation and honouring the Indigenous Peoples who have been living and working with and on the land from time immemorial. When doing land acknowledgments, it is important to first have an understanding of your position in history and the history that has resulted in your residing on a particular land.

We acknowledge the land we are on to show respect for Indigenous Peoples; to recognize Indigenous Peoples' enduring relationship with the land; to raise awareness about the history of colonialism that is often suppressed or forgotten; and to provide opportunity to have an open dialog about Indigenous history.

Unfortunately, too often, the protocol of land acknowledgements has become a token action rather than a meaningful practice. Reconciliation is about relationships. What are your relationships with Indigenous peoples and communities, with land? What systems do you participate in, uphold, or disrupt every day?

Consider answering the following questions:

- How can individuals develop relationships with peoples whose territory they are living on in the contemporary Canadian geopolitical landscape?
- What truth and reconciliation work are you and your organization doing beyond acknowledging the territory where you live, work, and hold events?
- What might you be doing that perpetuates settler colonial futurity rather than considering alternative ways forward for Canada?
- Do you have an understanding of the on-going violence and the trauma that is part of the structure of past and current colonial practices?

But this makes me uncomfortable!

First of all, get over yourself! Learning is never easy. Discomfort is a good sign because it means change and resistance is happening! More importantly, it means we are questioning dominant ideas that are often overlooked. This discomfort can be transformative, and it allows you and others to confront your own place on these lands.

How to acknowledge the land?

The first step is to identify the traditional Peoples of the land you're on. This task might require some research.

Once you have identified the (likely multiple) Peoples on whose territory you reside, formulate the statement. There is no right or wrong way to give recognition and acknowledgment of land. I have included several scripts below to help ease the process.

Offer your acknowledgement at the very beginning of your event and/or gathering.

Building relationships with Indigenous Peoples in your area is important. If you already have strong relationships with Indigenous Peoples and some are attending your event, consider inviting them to give a welcome, before yours, by offering an honorarium, including a tobacco tie. Connecting with Indigenous Peoples in your area will allow you opportunity to build mutual relationships, learn how a nation would like to be acknowledged, and learn more about the history of the land and current challenges being faced. Remember, reconciliation is a relationship, not a checklist of boxes.

It is important to take time to reflect on what it means to give a land acknowledgement, and why this act is important. When giving a land acknowledgement, consider also speaking about the importance of this and the history of the land that you reside on.

How long should it be?

While a brief acknowledgement might work for some gatherings, it is also important to add intention and detail to the acknowledgement. Both time and care are needed to thoughtfully prepare an in-depth acknowledgement. It may be helpful to reflect on the following questions:

- Why is this acknowledgement happening?
- How does this acknowledgement relate to the event or work we are doing?
- What is the history of this territory? What are the impact of colonialism here?
- What is my relationship to this territory? Where am I and where are my ancestors from and how did I and they come to be here?
- What intentions do I have to disrupt and dismantle colonialism beyond this territory acknowledgment?

By answering these questions, you will be able to develop a land acknowledgement specific to the history and land you reside on.

I'm not sure how to pronounce a nation's name?

It is important to learn how to pronounce a nation's name. There are several ways to learn how. You can respectfully ask someone from that nation or from a local organization such as a Friendship Centre or Indigenous Student Centre. You can check the nation's website, as they may have a phonetic pronunciation on their "About" page, an audio recording or video that includes their name. Also, try searching the nations name on YouTube, Facebook, or Instagram for video clips.

We've already done a land acknowledgement in the past. Do we need to do it again?

Yes. As mentioned previously, land acknowledgement is Indigenous protocol. As long as you are occupying sacred Indigenous traditional land, you have a responsibility to continue the practice of land acknowledgments.

What's next?

Land acknowledgments are a small part of disrupting and dismantling colonial structures. As mentioned previously, it is important for you to start building relationships and connections with local Indigenous nations and organizations, to inform your own work and to support theirs. Use your tools and networking skills to find some contacts!

There is a lot of history specific to the land you reside on. You have a responsibility to build relationships with the land you are on and those who are original inhabitants of that land.

Script Examples:

"I want to acknowledge that we are on the traditional territory of [nation names]."

"The YWCA Regina is on the historical territory of the [nation names]. This territory is covered by [reference treaties here]"

"As we gather together at YWCA Regina, we acknowledge the sacred land on which this organization operates. It has been the site of human acidity for 15,000 years. This land is the territory of the [nation names]. This territory was the subject of the [reference treaties here]. Today the meeting place of [city] is still home to many Indigenous Peoples from across Turtle Island, and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work in the community, on this territory.

"[City] is the home to a large Indigenous population including residential school survivors and intergenerational family members who have been impacted by the history and legacy of the residential school system and colonialism at large. This land is the territory of the [nation names]. We would like to take this time to also recognize the importance of why we do land acknowledgments [insert details]"

"As we begin today, we acknowledge the history, spirituality, culture, and relationship to the land of the Indigenous Peoples of this region, including [nation names]. We seek to live in respect, peace, and right relations with them as we live and work upon their traditional territory. Colonialism is a current and ongoing process, and we are all Treaty people, and as Treaty people, we are accountable for the past and current colonial violence that Indigenous Peoples face.

Prepared by Shaya MacDonald, Mi'kmaq First Nations
Consultant for the Reconciliation Action Committee, YWCA Canada
(Edited, with permission, by Randy Lundy, Director of Indigenous Relations, YWCA Regina, March 2020)