Indigenous Peoples Terminology Guide

This guide was created to provide members of the School of Aquatic and Fishery Sciences (SAFS) at the University of Washington with the tools to discuss Indigenous peoples in a respectful and intentionally inclusive way. Language changes over time—as does what is deemed acceptable by the communities impacted by settler colonial languages. This is not a comprehensive guide. Indigenous communities are extraordinarily diverse, and this writing is limited by the authors’ experience. This guide is created specifically for settlers and non-Indigenous peoples in the United States.

This guide is a living document and will be updated as needed. Suggestions are welcome, and any text herein may be subject to change according to shifts in culture and usage. Please email the chairs of the SAFS Equity and Inclusion Committee at safsincl@uw.edu to provide feedback or request a time to discuss the content in this guide.

Terminology

The best approach is always to ask the specific community or individual you are speaking about how they would like to be identified.

When can I use the word “Indian”?

- When referring to Indian people from the country of India
- When the word is in the name of a tribe, e.g.,
  - Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians
  - Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians
- When referring to laws, court cases, and other legal terminology, e.g.,
  - Indian Removal Act of 1830*
  - Indian Country (legal definition)
- When referring to US governmental entities or terminology containing the word, e.g.,
  - Bureau of Indian Affairs
  - American Indian/Alaska Native (census demographic category)
- When referring to an organization or group containing the word, e.g.,
  - UW American Indian Studies Department
  - Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission (NWIFC)
- NOT when referring to an individual or group of Native Americans
- NOT when referring to common tropes or stereotypes, e.g.,
  - Cowboys and Indians
  - Indian Giver

“Indian” is not the preferred way for non-Indigenous people to refer to Indigenous people in the United States. It is a colonial term that has its roots in the legacy of Christopher Columbus.

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misidentifying the Indigenous people he came into contact with in the Americas. While some Native Americans may be comfortable referring to themselves or being referred to as “Indians”, it is best for non-Indigenous people to use other language.

What should I say instead?

Best:

Using a specific tribe’s name, such as when introducing someone or talking about a community, is the best way to refer to Indigenous people and communities. For example,

- “The Lummi Nation is located in the northern coastal region of Washington state.”
- “He is a citizen of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma”

Always ask how somebody identifies. Misidentification of tribal affiliation is very common, and it is disrespectful to both the individual and tribal sovereignty*. Avoid generalizing statements meant to group together all Indigenous people when you are talking about someone or something from a specific tribe. **Be as specific as possible.**

Even Better:

Most tribe’s official names are Anglicized, have Spanish or French origins, or are borrowed words from other tribes’ languages. If possible, ask how a tribe/individual identifies themselves in their own language (e.g., Diné instead of Navajo). It is okay to ask, but please be mindful that many Indigenous people do not speak their language due to the impacts of colonization, forced assimilation, the Sixties Scoop*, and disconnection.

Good:

*Native American or Indigenous*

When referring to Native Americans or Indigenous people more broadly, these two terms are generally the most accepted. The term “Indigenous” can be used to reference the multitude of Indigenous peoples around the world while the term “Native American” specifically refers to the Indigenous people of the Americas. Both terms have their roots in political organizing against colonization.

“Native American” can be used as a noun or an adjective; “Native” and “Indigenous” are adjectives, so be sure to use them in conjunction with another word (e.g., Indigenous person, Indigenous community, Native food sovereignty). Always capitalize the terms “Native American”, “Indigenous”, and “Native”!

Note: Many Indigenous people in the United States are not members of tribes, such as Indigenous Hawaiians and CHamoru people. Additionally, many Indigenous people in the states of Alaska and Hawaii do not identify as Native American and may instead prefer the terms “Alaska Native” and “Native Hawaiian”, respectively.
Also note: You may hear Native American people using “Natives” as a noun in referring to their own communities, but non-Native people should use “Native American”, as it is generally more preferred and respectful. Likewise, the term “NDN” is only for in-group use.

First Nations
The term “First Nations” is not as commonly used in the United States as it is in Canada. It is used to identify Indigenous peoples in Canada who are not Métis or Inuit. For more information on terminology used in Canada, please refer to this Indigenous Terminology Guide from Queens University and to the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), Volume 1, page iii.

A special note on Inuit:
- Inuk: singular, one person
- Inuuk: plural, two people
- Inuit: plural, three or more people

Aboriginal
Aboriginal is not a preferred term in the United States. It’s more commonly used in Australia and Canada. The authors of this guide are unfamiliar with specific Indigenous peoples in Canada and Australia, so this is not the best resource for that. See the entry on “First Nations” for more information on terminology used in Canada. For more information on terminology used in Australia, please refer to this article from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS).

Bad:
These terms are derogatory or slurs. Do not use them.
- Eskimo: This is a word of disputed etymology that generally refers to the Indigenous Inuit and Yupik peoples in the Arctic regions of North America and Asia. It is almost universally considered derogatory, so it is best to use the names of specific groups. Although less ideal, “Inuit” can be used to refer to the Indigenous peoples of the Arctic more broadly. In certain legal and governmental contexts, “Inuit” is used to refer to a range of Indigenous Arctic peoples.
- Redskin: This word is directly connected to settler colonial practices of killing Native Americans and taking their scalps for bounties. It is a racial slur and extremely offensive.
- Savage: It should go without saying that referring to individuals, communities, or cultures as “savage” (adj) or “savages” (n) is dehumanizing, racist, and offensive.
- Squaw: Although this word was likely derived from words in the Algonquian language related to women, it has been used as a slur for centuries to disparage, sexualize, and objectify Native women and girls.
The Alphabet of Common Microaggressions

It is likely you have said or referred to one or more of these things without realizing they are harmful stereotypes. The invisibility of Indigenous Peoples and lack of awareness has led to many of these things becoming ingrained in US American culture and lexicon. The purpose of this section is to dispel common stereotypes, educate, and create an opportunity for self-reflection if you have said or heard any of these things. Words have impact, and our hope is that after reading this, you will have the knowledge and power to check yourself and correct others who say something harmful.

Alcoholism
The association of Native Americans being alcoholics has its roots in colonization. The history of alcohol as a tool in the European colonization of the Americas is beyond the scope of this guide. The impacts of colonization, intergenerational trauma, residential schools*, forced adoption, and ongoing discrimination have led to a mental health crisis in Native American communities, effects of which include high rates of alcohol and drug addiction (not applicable or generalizable across all communities). It is not true that Native Americans are predisposed to or at higher genetic risk of experiencing addiction.

Blood Quantum
Do not ask someone, “What percent are you?” or, “How much Native American are you?” Not only is this rude, but more importantly blood quantum does not define Indigenous identity. It is a colonial tool that was imposed on tribes in an attempt to disconnect people from their heritage and culture. The concept of blood quantum is that an individual’s Native heritage can be “diluted” and eventually removed entirely if they have mixed ancestry (perversely, the “one drop rule” used for the oppression of Black Americans makes the opposite claim, that any African ancestry, no matter how little or distant, defines a person as Black). Blood quantum policies have had devastating implications in land ownership, disenrollment, access to resources, etc. Related: DNA tests cannot show you if you are Native American or not because it is a political and community-based identity, not a racial identity.

Casinos
Many tribes, but not all, have casinos, and they are a source of income for the tribes that have them. However, a common misconception is that casinos make individual Native American people wealthy. Many negative perceptions of tribally owned casinos originate in colonial opposition to tribal sovereignty and self-determination.

Dreamcatchers
Dreamcatchers are often appropriated for home décor by non-Indigenous people. They belong to Anishinaabe people and use or production by non-Native people is cultural appropriation.
Erasure

“Native Americans didn’t live here, so my family didn’t steal this land.”

Many places in the United States erase their Indigenous peoples’ history, both before European contact and after the start of colonization. For example, 27 states do not include any information about Native Americans after 1900 in their mandated curriculums. Also, many regions claim Indigenous peoples never lived there or “only” used land for hunting, but this is almost never true. Indigenous peoples lived in all areas and regions of the Americas in complex civilizations. All land in the Americas is Indigenous land. To find out more about the Indigenous land on which you reside, please visit https://native-land.ca/

“Feather Indian or Dot Indian”

Do not say this. It is not funny and is offensive to both Native American and Indian people, reducing both peoples to a single visual stereotype.

“Get Over it”

There is a misconception that the colonization of Native Americans in the US happened a long time ago and ended with the Indian wars of the late 1800’s. In reality, colonization is an ongoing process that actively impacts people today. Native Americans still live all over the US and are trying to revive their traditions. Genocide, forced assimilation, land theft, family separation, and other impacts of colonization are not something that they can “get over” because it still causes harm in Native communities. There is a lot of social justice and environmental justice activism work being done by Indigenous People globally to fight the ongoing impacts of colonialism on Indigenous rights and the environment.

Headdresses

Feathered headdresses are frequently appropriated by non-Native people for the aesthetic (Coachella), which is especially inappropriate because the headdress is a sacred item that must be earned. Not all tribes wore headdresses either. The most recognizable headdress to many US Americans is the feathered war bonnet, used only by some tribes of the Great Plains region.

Indian Names

“Ooh, ‘Raven’. Is that your Indian Name?”

Do not ask someone to give you an “Indian Name”, and do not make jokes about what your “Indian Name” is. It is inappropriate and offensive. Many Native American people have English, French, or Spanish names due to colonization. Do not ask about or comment on someone’s name or discredit their identity.

Jewelry

Wearing traditional and contemporary styles of Native American jewelry is an important part of many people’s identity. It is considered professional, even for men, to wear jewelry or medallions. While it is not inherently cultural appropriation for a non-Native person to wear most types of jewelry (some types may be off limits to non-Native people), Native American aesthetics have often been co-opted and produced by non-Native people. If you are interested in wearing Indigenous jewelry or clothing, always ask if it is okay first and purchase from a
Native craftsperson. Native American beadwork, quillwork, and turquoise is beautiful and can be appreciated by all, but it is a craft that requires years of practice and should not be produced by non-Native people.

“Low man on the totem pole”
This phrase is used to describe someone of lower ranking, but totem poles do not have hierarchies. Additionally, totem poles are sacred to the tribes who have them, so referring to them in this way is offensive. This phrase can easily be replaced with “junior-level”, “lower rank”. Related: “powwow”, “chief”, and “tribe” have also been incorporated into US American workplace vocabulary in inappropriate contexts, such as, “Let’s have a quick powwow to discuss this,” or “tribal politics” to describe non-tribal politics. “Off the reservation” is another term that should be avoided and replaced with “outside the box”, “out of bounds”, or “go rogue”.

Mascots
Native American mascots and imagery are very common in sports and schools of all levels (high schools through professional teams). This portrays Indigenous people as caricatures and has measurable negative consequences on Native American youth mental health and self-esteem. Learn more about the impacts of Native American mascots. While many schools have changed their mascots and some professional teams have changed their names (e.g., the Washington DC football team is now the Commanders, the Cleveland baseball team is now the Guardians), there are still hundreds of schools and sports teams that use Native American names and imagery.

Nature
There is a misconception that Native American people are “more in tune with nature” or more connected with nature in a mythical way. This trope ties back to the idea of the “Mystical Indian” or “Noble Savage” that praises Indigenous worldviews from the simplified and whitewashed view of colonizers. For example, a popular anti-pollution campaign in the 1970’s used the image of a crying Native American man in a canoe, but the actor who played the man was really an Italian American. Indigenous worldviews and knowledge systems of the natural world should not be simplified and whitewashed, nor co-opted by non-Indigenous people. A more in-depth discussion of this stereotype is outside of the scope of this document.

“Oh, you’re Native American? Do you know *random Native American person*? Have you watched *white savior film about Native Americans*?”
No and no. I do not know every Native American in the continental United States and I have not consumed every piece of media relating to Native Americans. In fact, these are usually made by white people.

Pocahontas and Princesses
The story of Matoaka, more commonly known as Pocahontas, has been heavily romanticized (even before the Disney movie). She was a child that was taken from her home as a captive and forced into marriage with an Englishman. The sexualization of Indigenous women is a huge problem that has contributed to the extremely high rates of murder and sexual abuse of Native
women. Learn more about Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women. (Note: Native American tribes did not have princesses.)

**Quiet and Stoic**

Another common misconception is that Native American people are stoic and silent. This is a harmful stereotype because it depicts Native American people as one-dimensional, and lacking agency and individuality. This could not be further from the truth; story-telling plays an important role in Indigenous cultures and Indigenous People are expressive and have diverse experiences and personalities.

**Regalia**

Do not call Native American regalia “costumes”. Regalia is personal, and oftentimes contains sacred or earned pieces that are important to the individual wearer. If you are unsure what something is, ask. Related: DO NOT WEAR NATIVE AMERICAN COSTUMES. It is offensive to play dress up with living cultures, especially those that have been marginalized and criminalized for wearing traditional clothes. It also leads to the sexualization of Native American women (see Pocahontas and Princesses).

**Spirit Animals**

*“Harry Styles is my spirit animal!”*

He is not. Please do not say that you have a spirit animal or ask people what their spirit animal is as an icebreaker, etc. This is cultural appropriation and a simplification of complex ways of knowing and sacred spiritual practices.

**Taxes**

*“Native Americans are lucky because they get checks from the government and don’t have to pay taxes.”*

It is not true that Native Americans get direct payouts from the government or don’t pay taxes. Poverty is a major problem in many communities, and government assistance programs and services that were promised in treaties have not been fulfilled and perpetually under-serve Indigenous communities.

**Universities**

*“You must go to college for free since you’re Native American.”*

It is not true Native Americans go to college for free. Specific scholarships may exist, but it is a total myth that you can go to school for free simply because you are Native American.

**Vanishing**

*“I thought Native Americans were extinct.”*

There is a belief that Native Americans are vanishing or already gone, but this is untrue (see Erasure). Native Americans are still here and thriving despite centuries of genocide and oppression. The invisibility and exclusion of Native Americans is, however, a major problem that leads to a lack of awareness and cultural competency.

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Warfare

“Weren’t the Native Americans already fighting each other when Europeans arrived?”
US Americans often degrade Native American people for intertribal conflicts in order to justify their violent colonization and land theft. This is a racist double standard as conflict is just an aspect of human nature; conflicts between Indigenous nations in the Americas were no different than wars between nations in Europe. Native American people are not a homogenous group.

Xenophobia

Due to the erasure and invisibility of Native American identities in the United States, settlers often ignorantly assume Indigenous People that are not white must be from elsewhere. This othering of Indigenous Peoples on their own lands is a harmful but frequent occurrence due to white supremacy and xenophobia.

“You don’t look Native American”
There is no one way to look Native American. There is inherent variation between tribes due to the diversity of Indigenous people across the continent. There are also Black Native and White Native people.

Glossary

Boarding schools or residential schools: Throughout the end of the 1800’s to late 1900’s, thousands of Indigenous children were sent or forced to attend boarding schools that assimilated them to Anglo-American lifestyles. They cut children’s hair short, forbid them from practicing their cultures, and punished them for speaking their native languages. Physical, sexual, and mental abuse were rampant, and an unknown number of Indigenous children died at these institutions. Learn more about US Indian Boarding School History.

Indian Removal Act of 1830: This act led to the forced removal of Native American tribes from the Southeastern United States to primarily what is now Oklahoma.

Sixties Scoop: This refers to a time period in the 1950’s–1980’s where huge numbers of Indigenous children were taken from their families and placed into usually white middle class homes through trans-racial fostering or adoption. This is still a problem today within the foster care system, where Native American children are overrepresented.

Tribal sovereignty: “Tribal sovereignty refers to the right of American Indians and Alaska Natives to govern themselves. The United States Constitution recognizes Indian tribes as distinct governments and they have, with a few exceptions, the same powers as federal and state governments to regulate their internal affairs. Sovereignty for tribes includes the right to establish their own form of government, determine membership requirements, enact legislation, and establish law enforcement and court systems.” (definition from the National Conference of State Legislatures)
Further Education Materials

*All My Relations*

*All My Relations* is a podcast that explores the complexities of Indigenous life, identity, experience, and relationships in the world today. The podcast was founded by Adrienne Keene (Cherokee Nation) and Matika Wilbur (Swinomish and Tulalip) and is currently hosted by Matika Wilbur and Desi Small-Rodriguez (Northern Cheyenne and Chicana). They often have guests on the show who share their stories, perspectives, and expert knowledge. Matika Wilbur is a visual storyteller who started [Project 562](#) to photograph and gather stories from the 562 federally recognized tribes in the US. Desi Small-Rodriguez is an Assistant Professor of American Indian Studies and Sociology at UCLA and a co-founder of the [US Indigenous Data Sovereignty Network](#) and the [Global Indigenous Data Alliance](#).

*Indigenous Aquaculture*

The **Indigenous Aquaculture** community of practice is a collaboration between Pacific-region Sea Grant offices, Indigenous communities in the Pacific Northwest and Hawai‘i, universities, and other organizations. The group “supports and advances the practices of tending, stewarding, producing, and managing sustainable coastal food systems based on Native and Indigenous knowledges, relationships, and traditions.” Their site contains links to more resources on Indigenous aquaculture practices and guidance on collaborating with Indigenous communities.

*Native Appropriations*

Adrienne Keene is a citizen of the Cherokee Nation and runs a blog called *Native Appropriations*. In the blog, she discusses a wide range of topics relating to Native American representation in American culture and public perception. Adrienne Keene is a faculty member in American Studies and Ethnic Studies at Brown University, author of the book [Notable Native People: 50 Indigenous Leaders, Dreamers, and Changemakers from Past and Present](#), and co-founder of the podcast *All My Relations*.

*Native Arts and Cultures Foundation (NACF)*

The **Native Arts and Cultures Foundation** works to advance equity and cultural knowledge, using the arts to promote positive social change with Native American communities. They run arts programs and provide funding to Indigenous arts organizations. In 2020, NAFC hosted a webinar titled *The Black-Indigenous/Afro-Indigenous Experience*, which highlighted the experiences of people who are Black and Native American. To learn more about issues that impact Black-Indigenous People, see the work of Amber Starks (Muscogee), an Afro Indigenous activist and organizer who is an enrolled citizen of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation and is also of Shawnee, Yuchi, Quapaw, and Cherokee descent.

*Native Land*

The interactive **Native Land** map shows the traditional territories of Indigenous peoples across the world, as well as language regions and treaty lands. This is helpful for creating land acknowledgements and learning about the Indigenous and colonial histories of the lands you
are on. The territories displayed on the map are not exact, and it is always best to verify information with the specific tribe(s) you are learning about.

Pacific Sea Garden Collective
This story map documents a variety of ancestral Indigenous aquaculture practices and showcases the diversity of Sea Gardens Across the Pacific. The map is a work in progress that is being put together by Indigenous knowledge holders, researchers, and artists. Each entry contains an in-depth description of ancestral connections, geographic and temporal extent, biophysical manipulations, target species, ceremony and stewardship, and its current status.

A Supportive Guide to Land Acknowledgements
The SAFS Land Acknowledgement Guide was developed and is regularly revised by the SAFS Equity & Inclusion Committee. Its purpose is to help raise awareness about the history of Coast Salish People and the land where the City of Seattle is located. It also provides facilitative instructions on how and why to craft and deliver an attentive land acknowledgement statement. It is meant as a gateway to begin learning about the history of Indigenous Peoples and modifying our behaviors to acknowledge and respect Indigenous Peoples.

Udall Foundation
The Udall Foundation offers many opportunities for Native American students at the undergraduate and graduate level in healthcare, environmental science and policy, and tribal policy. Acceptance to these programs requires strong recommendation letters and guidance that can be difficult to find for Native American students attending primarily white institutions far from their home communities. Follow the link above for information about the available programs and scholarships and explore the application processes to learn how to best support students.

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