



Truth and Reconciliation Commission Call to Action #46.ii.

Repudiation of concepts used to justify European sovereignty over Indigenous lands and peoples, such as the *Doctrine of Discovery and terra nullius*, and the reformation of laws, governance structures, and policies within their respective institutions that continue to rely on such concepts.

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples 37(1)

Indigenous peoples have the right to the recognition, observance and enforcement of treaties, agreements and other constructive arrangements concluded with States or their successors and to have States honour and respect such treaties, agreements and other constructive arrangements.

What does this mean?

The TRC asks Canadians to recognize a *principle of reconciliation* that Indigenous peoples were here first, for thousands of years. But it's not about the number of years – it's about the principle that Indigenous peoples were caring for the land prior to any explorers from other parts of the world.

When the King of England proclaimed in 1763 that when explorers 'discovered' new land (despite the fact that Indigenous peoples had been there for millennia and did not somehow lose the land), and the explorers wanted to own the land, they had to compensate the people already there. Unfortunately many explorers interpreted the King's proclamation as meaning they couldn't take land from 'civilized people' - those who looked like them and had the same understandings of owning land. Explorers coming to what is now Canada believed that land is owned by individuals like assets. Indigenous peoples believe that land is not owned but cared for like a relation, like a mother. So explorers decided Indigenous peoples really didn't act like 'civilized peoples' as they didn't own anything...so they decided the land was vacant of civilized people, "terra nullius". Therefore the explorers could simply take the land.

Why do land acknowledgements?

Today when non-Indigenous organizations start meetings and events with a land acknowledgement, it is a statement of understanding that the land was not empty when explorers came here. It is a statement of principle of reconciliation. An effective land acknowledgement includes a sense of the relationship to the land, and relationship to the Indigenous peoples who have cared for it for thousands of years. An effective land acknowledgement is more than simply words – it has meaning and commitment.

There is public expectation that a land acknowledgement is also one of the steps the non-Indigenous organization takes in its reconciliation journey. It may be a first step, but it cannot be the only step. Reconciliation is more than words.

How to do an effective land acknowledgement

Do your research:

- Know the difference between Inuit, Métis and First Nations – they are distinct and each group requires a slightly different approach in a land acknowledgement.
- Who was here first? Check <https://native-land.ca/> and the *Whose Land Is It Anyway* app at <https://www.whose.land/en/about>. The location might be the traditional land of one Indigenous community or maybe more than one. Get it right.
- Please use the name of the Indigenous community that they have given themselves, not the name that the federal government has used. Ask for help on how to pronounce it properly, in advance.
- Ceded or unceded? When the Indigenous community signed a treaty with the federal government, it is considered ‘ceded’ meaning there was some discussion about settlers being on the land. If there has been no treaty or agreement, it means that the Indigenous community has had no say at all if settlers could be on their land, it is ‘unceded’.
 - Is the land covered by treaty? What treaty? For example, the City of Toronto is on the ceded territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, and the land is covered by the Toronto Purchase of 1805. Most of Toronto is covered by this treaty, and another is underway, with more information on the First Nation’s website. Yes, this is important information.
- What is the culture of the Indigenous group to recognize?
 - Inuit communities are culturally Inuit.
 - Métis communities are culturally Métis.
 - First Nations communities have many different cultures, and sometimes the culture is also in the name of the community. For example: Fort William First Nation in northern Ontario is Ojibway, Taku River Tlingit First Nation in northern BC is Tlingit. Do your research.

Best Practices:

- Are you in an urban area? Most likely the land is both a traditional land of one or two or more Indigenous groups, AND a meeting place for many Indigenous peoples. It would be appropriate to acknowledge the history of many Indigenous groups meeting here.
- What else can you learn about the Indigenous group who cared for the land? Population, services, contributions, events, etc.
- Don’t copy somebody else’s land acknowledgement – what’s the point if you don’t do your own research and make it your own?
- As the speaker doing the land acknowledgement, please also introduce yourself in relation to the land – answer the coded question “Where are you from?” because this goes hand in hand with doing effective land acknowledgements.
- It is the responsibility of the highest ranking executive of the non-Indigenous organization to do the acknowledgement. Don’t ask the Elder or Indigenous employee to do it, it’s not their responsibility.
- As the senior executive, consider introducing the acknowledgement, then asking an employee to complete the land acknowledgement (who has done his or her own research), so it is new and meaningful every time, and builds knowledge and understanding across the organization.

Link the commitment(s) of your organization to reconciliation in the land acknowledgement – because reconciliation is action. Why is your organization doing a land acknowledgement, and then what is your organization doing to contribute to reconciliation?