

Cultivating Best Practices for Building Tribal Partnerships

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Case Study: Indigenous Gardens Network

The Indigenous Gardens Network (IGN) is a hub of collaborative projects between the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians and the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, supported by Southwest Oregon partners (SWO partners). The goal is to increase Tribal community access to traditional homelands and engage in First Food restoration projects that support reconnection to culturally significance plants through tending, cultivation, and harvesting.

Established in 2020 during the COVID pandemic, a series of group listening sessions engaged Tribal members to identify existing barriers to this type of work in southwest Oregon, set goals for First Food restoration and Food Sovereignty, and establish how the IGN would be governed. Between 2021-2023, the IGN has identified a few projects to begin working on and formed subcommittees to accomplish the work. Monthly and bi-monthly meetings continue, as well as seasonal site visits to southwest Oregon to coordinate with partners and projects.

Some things we've learned along the way:

1. **We work to protect our Tribal partners from outside distractions and ignorance** from bureaucracy that may hinder their access or work, and from unwanted interactions with the public. Many aspects of the relationships are nuanced and informed by support personnel who are Native and with the support of non-Natives are actively learning the ways to build good relationships with Tribal people.
 - a. **Example:** Native support staff vet incoming non-Native organizations and their representatives, sharing the purpose of the IGN and how the structure works.
2. **The IGN centers Tribal partners, their communities, and their identified goals.** Their site visits are fully funded, lodging is arranged, meals are provided, we strive to give gifts each time and to provide them with stipends for their time.
 - a. **Example:** The IGN supports the communities of Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians and the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde. Each Tribe has a

Tribal-council approved liaison from their Tribal staff representing their Tribe and communities in the work of the IGN.

3. **Tribal leadership and vision guides the work**, while local partners and staff from the SWO partners do much of the program management work to acquire funding, organize meetings and trip logistics, purchase materials, provide maps or other helpful resources, volunteers when needed.
 - a. **Example:** The support staff of IGN are women of color, women in science, and Native women (who don't have ancestral ties to place) and we constantly working to check in with each other and hold each other accountable that we are moving at the pace of our Tribal partners and in service to their goals.
4. **We've remained flexible with timelines and grant deliverables** and have appreciated the flexibility and understanding from funding partners. At times, Tribal partners have changed their plans due to many factors such as: Tribal staff and Tribal Council changes, and changing capacity as Tribal partners have lives and jobs separate from the IGN.
5. **This work can be deeply emotional.** We are undoing harm from colonial trauma, not just on the land, but in our bodies, hearts, minds, and spirits. The importance of this work cannot be over-emphasized. Because this work can be emotional, it is extra important to practice active listening, self-reflection, self-awareness, somatic self-soothing, emotional regulation, and mindful responses.
6. **Relationship building is nuanced and informed by Indigenous worldview.** Some of the symptoms of white supremacy that we face externally and work to change internally: worship of the written word, urgency, quantity over quality, and linear concepts of time.
7. **Because of our willingness to mindfully engage, become humbled, be corrected, and grow**, we have had the privilege of becoming friends with and being in community with our Tribal partners. We have the joy of receiving gifts from them, from service berry fruit leather, to earrings and necklaces to the gift of their friendship and the honor of being invited into their homes. We have received the gift of tending the land alongside them and witnessing their connection to place and hearing songs sung to the land. We have received the gift of learning from them, and the gift of their laughter and shared humor.

Cultivating Your Own Best Practices

Building partnerships with Indigenous people is essential

- Building partnerships that center Indigenous voices and self-identified goals directly addresses historical injustices and land dispossession by uplifting Tribal sovereignty and self-determination.
 - **Local example:** This is specifically important in what is now known as Southern Oregon. In 1856 Tribal people were forcibly removed from their homes and homeland by the US Government and relocated to reservations. Because of that,

there is now little access to their homelands or representation for their descendants.

- Indigenous worldview provides interconnected perspectives on social, economic, environmental and spiritual systems. These perspectives can enrich quality of life and help address current issues in Indigenous communities and also provide benefits to non-Native people. For example, Traditional Ecological Knowledge provides deep understandings of relationships specific to place, and provides sustainable solutions in ecosystem management.
 - **Local example:** With support from conservation partners, the land has begun to see the return of its ancestral stewards and with the support of community volunteers at Vesper Meadow, riparian restoration and seeding will benefit first foods like Camas lily as well as numerous other plants, pollinators, and other animal relatives.
 - **Actionable idea from the workshop:** How to integrate interconnectedness, reciprocal relationships, and other “ways of being” into an organization as a whole, and not just in relationships with Indigenous people.
- By integrating non-Western voices, the field of conservation can turn to a more holistic approach that will address current environmental and societal issues caused by settler colonial culture and worldview.
 - **Local example:** Cultural fire is beginning to return to the homelands now known as Vesper Meadow through partnership with the Traditional Ecological Inquiry Program led by Siletz Elder Joe Scott. Tribal partners with the Indigenous Gardens Network have goals of bringing cultural fire back to the oak savannahs now known as Table Rocks.

Transactional versus Reciprocal relationship

Respect and reciprocity are two cornerstones of relationship building with Native people and Tribal communities. Reciprocity implies mutual benefit, however keep in mind that sometimes that mutual benefit can be a reconnection between Tribal communities and their homelands; the land benefits from being reconnected to its original stewards.

Tips for engaging with reciprocity:

1. **Learn about Tribal Sovereignty**, and work to center and support it. (<https://youtu.be/BOYcgvEU0V0?si=gIbFB-4pPdrIJ46H>)
2. **Strive to first ask how your organization can support current Tribal projects and initiatives** instead of asking how Tribes can support or partner with your work - unless they reach out to collaborate on your projects on their own.
 - a. Be authentic and honest. Be clear about what resources or support you can offer a Tribe or Native communities and what you can't or what levels of support may take time to overcome barriers to.
 - b. **Local example:** Prior to being hired by Vesper Meadow, I asked several Native people (local elders, and Siletz Tribal member), what -they- wanted me to accomplish in the position. I included their requests in my application cover letter.

3. **Plan to take the time necessary and start early in your program/project development process when engaging with Tribes.** Include Tribal members in the goal setting, project outlining, and original agreements.
 - a. **Actionable idea:** Cultivate a 1-2 page document, or short video explaining who your organization is, and what resources or funding you can offer to Tribes or how you are poised to support their initiatives or current projects.
4. **Recognize that Native values may conflict with current policies and practices or your own personal ethics - work creatively to remove organizational or personal barriers.** If or when you get triggered, take a step back and remember your power and your privilege, and put those aside in respect of supporting Tribal and cultural sovereignty and Tribal-identified goals. Talk to your fellow coworkers, self-educate and do the work to move past your own personal or organizational barriers to supporting Tribal identified needs. Do not put the burden on Indigenous staff members or Tribal partners to educate you on why subsistence rights and cultural sovereignty are to be uplifted over colonial practices or personal ethics.
 - a. **Local example:** There have been tensions among staff members, namely vegans and vegetarians who have been triggered and had a hard time understanding and supporting the idea of Tribally led initiatives like rites of passage that include animal tracking and hunting. Remember the example that unless your organization is working towards Land Back, that returning access of ancestral homelands to Tribes and then dictating what they can or cannot do on their own homelands is nothing short of racism, white privilege, and white supremacy.
 - b. **Local example:** Native-led organizations have been bringing back the practice of cultural burning and educating non-Native organizations along the way. Barriers still exist and some organizations may require a red card for those attending a cultural burn - this is a barrier because cultural burning can be intergenerational and is insulting/offensive that Tribal people have to jump through bureaucratic hoops to engage in cultural practices on their homelands
5. **Understand that some attempts to collaborate may be met with hesitancy or resistance.** Be patient and ask questions of what they may need to proceed. Recall that harmful, violent and oppressive policies and actions against Native people and their culture both existed and continue to exist. Be patient and open-minded about the timeline of your partnership building.
 - a. Visit Tribes' websites and research if there is a best way to contact appropriate Tribal leaders, staff, elders and knowledge-keepers.
6. **Focus on building trust**
 - a. Hire Native people or Tribal members as liaisons for projects and as full-time staff members, or build a Native Advisory Council. Financially compensate whenever possible, or provide stipends and gifts.
7. **Attend Tribal and Native community events as appropriate**
 - a. Many Tribes host pow wows that are open to the community. Universities often have Native Student Unions that host community events and many universities have pow wows organized by the student unions. Many cities have

Indigenous-led events such as story-telling in the winter, or public learning opportunities for Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). These opportunities give you a chance to experience Native culture, values, diet, dancing, singing, and more.

8. Be flexible with timing and funding

- a. **Actionable idea:** Have a line item in your budget planning for grants that specifies a certain amount of each grant that goes either towards funding Tribal initiatives in your organization with Tribes, or to donate to Tribes initiatives directly.
- b. Have a line item in your End of Year grant reports to funders listing out the standard your organization is holding itself to to support Tribes and Native communities, even if there are no “deliverables” with Tribes in the grant - as a way to communicate to funders that your organization prioritizes and uplifts Tribal sovereignty and initiatives.

9. Remain non-judgmental and speak up and correct your fellow coworkers, partner organizations, friends and family members when they say or behave in ways that you have learned are ignorant and are therefore rooted in white privilege, white supremacy, or white fragility.

a. **Examples** of how to be supportive:

- i. From one coworker to another: “I hear that you are having a hard time with this. However, the program that is being suggested is supporting Cultural Sovereignty, which means it is our job to support and uplift their sovereignty. I am happy to support you later in understanding why this is important, but for now, we need to stop questioning or objecting and instead listen to and support Tribal sovereignty and initiatives.”
- ii. To a Tribal partner or Native coworker: “I am having a hard time with what you are proposing. I am going to take some time to self-reflect and seek out support in understanding why I feel so resistant. In the meantime, I’ll find another coworker to listen and support you in the program you are developing.”

10. Work on healing yourself: Settler colonialism affects everyone. Somewhere in your own history, colonization violently disrupted your cultural and ancestral connection to place and land. By learning about the history of the place (land) that you reside on and your own ancestral history and ties to place (land), you are fulfilling your responsibility to land and water. For more information, listen to Oren Lyon’s (Haudenosaunee) talk on [Responsibility vs Rights](https://youtu.be/USwPW29W-aY?si=n450JacdMhGKw-X4) (https://youtu.be/USwPW29W-aY?si=n450JacdMhGKw-X4)

11. Thoughts on Land Acknowledgements: Land acknowledgements are important but can be tricky. There should ideally be ongoing action at your organization, not just a static statement on your website or that you read at events. Land acknowledgements can be tricky to develop - ideally they are done with Tribes although that is not always feasible.

- a. **Recommended resource:** Land Acknowledgement Guidance Document from Legislative Commission on Indian Services (all nine federally recognized Tribes of Oregon have a representative on the Commission):

<https://www.oregon.gov/oda/shared/Documents/Publications/Administration/Land AcknowledgementGuidanceDocument.pdf>

Plan to invest in the relationship

We work to understand our power and privilege and other forms of oppression that can be unconsciously perpetrated against Indigenous people; unconscious and ignorant behaviors or language can harm the partnership we seek to develop.

(<https://chinookfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Supplemental-Information-for-Funding-Guidelines.pdf>)

Tips for relationship building:

1. **Relationship building looks different with each Tribe, each Tribal department or organization, and each Tribal member.** Practice flexibility, be observant, be mindful, engage in self-reflection, ask questions, and keep trying.
 - a. Educate yourself beforehand; this may include learning their history, attending a community event or rally, reading a historical or contemporary book, or developing a personal friendship.
2. **Approach partnerships with Creativity, Patience, Preparation, Planning, Respect in relation to Indigenous worldview**
 - a. Engage in face-to-face meetings before connecting via email, phone calls, or text whenever possible
 - b. Sharing food and gift-giving is an integral part of building community
 - i. **Local example:** some gifts given from Vesper Meadow to visiting Tribal partners have included: elderberry syrup made from elderberries gathered at Vesper, a map of the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument with circled areas for specific cultural plant interests
 - c. Be willing to get comfortable with being uncomfortable
 - i. Relationship building includes the understanding that misunderstandings, mistakes, and missteps will happen. Initiate or show up for restorative conversations to acknowledge issues, repair harm and rebuild trust when needed.
3. **Provide time and funding towards education**, both for yourself, your organization, and any Native or Tribal staff or liaisons you may have. Many systemic barriers exist for Native and Tribal people around Western education and career building. Additionally, remember that Indigenous knowledge was not and is not “certified” or “licensed” so be open-minded and supportive of “non-credentialed” Native staff members, liaisons, Tribal council members, etc. Consider how the standards of professionalism are defined by white supremacy culture.

(https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_bias_of_professionalism_standards)

Learn about Indigenous Worldview

It is our responsibility in working with Tribal communities to do our own research to understand Indigenous worldview, local Tribal history and current events.

- **Local example:** Vesper Meadow staff make an annual effort to travel to Grand Ronde and Siletz to engage with and build relationships with their communities. We have visited the Grand Ronde Chachalu Museum, attended the annual Siletz pow wow, and virtually attended the 2023 Grand Ronde Culture Summit.
1. **Remain open to learning about other ways of knowing and being.** Indigenous worldview differs from Western Worldview in many ways. There are commonalities across Indian Country and also Tribal-specific differences or place-specific nuances as well. Some resources:
 - a. Relational Worldview Model
(<https://opentextbc.ca/indigenizationfrontlineworkers/chapter/indigenous-ways-of-knowing-and-being/>)
 - b. Kinship Worldview
(<https://kindredmedia.org/2022/07/restoring-the-kinship-worldview-read-the-books-introduction/>)
 2. **Consider that historic and current Native cultures are place-based peoples.** This means that their language, culture, cultural practices, ceremonies, diet, and more are or were tied to place (land)
 - a. **Importance of Place-based human-land relationships:** Learn about and consult with Tribes that have direct ancestral ties to the specific place you are working with. Note that this can be a complicated issue, as related to a myriad of issues such as Federal recognitions, that some Tribes may live within their traditional homelands while others may not, there may be disagreements between Tribes about ancestral territories...and for many other reasons, this can be a traumatic issue to ask of Tribal people while also being confusing for non-native people to understand. Be willing to work with your discomfort, and strive to stay open-minded and open-hearted as you learn about and support Native people and their connection to place.
 3. **Learn about Intergenerational trauma, collective trauma, and become trauma-informed.** Trauma-informed care is becoming well known in the social services sector, however, being mindful of an individual's or group's potential traumatic life experiences provides a framework of how to engage with trustworthiness, empowerment, choice, and collaboration.
(<https://www.acesaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Trauma-resilience-practice-paper.pdf>)
 - a. **Take time to self-educate about widespread traumatic issues affecting Indian Country.** The US Government's policies of removal of children, dispossession of land, the outlaw of language, ceremonial practices, and more. Some of these practices continued to exist until 1978, and some continue today (the Rogue Valley exists on stolen lands.) Educating yourself about the political, legal, and racialized oppressions that local Native communities face can help you understand how recent and existing traumas continue to impact Native people, Tribes, and communities.

- b. **Local example:** Land that you or your organization manages or owns, or any land in Rogue Valley has inherent traumatic associations due to past and continued settler-use/damage to the land, and how they have been stolen with little to no recognition/understanding by current owners. Keep in mind that Indigenous worldview doesn't include private land possession or as a commodity that can be bought and sold. The continued actions under the dominant worldview that cause damage to the land and water also inflict trauma on Indigenous communities who forced to "stand by and watch" as their land and water relatives are made sick and access is blocked to former villages, cultural and ceremonial sites.
- 4. **Learn or develop a "felt sense" for social interactions** and be aware that some common Western social customs and greetings are not as common among Tribes, Native communities, or Native people.
 - a. Do not be offended if Native people don't look you in the eye much, do not keep their video on during zoom meetings, or do not want to exchange hugs or even a hand shake. Some Native people will engage in those social behaviors, some will not - take your social cues from them first.

Be Mindful of Phrasing

Asking questions and sharing information is a good thing. However, the way a question is asked or how an article is written can cause harm.

1. **Do not refer to Native languages, lands, cultures, or ceremonies as "lost"** - they were violently taken, or illegal to practice - never "lost"
2. **Ask for permission to share.** When sharing information publically or writing an article about a project or program in partnership with Tribes, ensure you understand what is ok to share and what needs to remain confidential or private. This can include language and phrasing, and when it is appropriate to take or share photos and when it is not.
3. **Being mindful of how you talk and share things in writing.** Phrasing examples:
 - a. "Why do you want land back?" could be asked a better way such as:
 - i. "Are you willing to share what land back would mean to you and your community?"
 - ii. "Could you direct me to some resources to learn about land back?"
 - b. "Public land" in the context of working with Tribes is more accurately their ancestral homelands - move towards language and phrasing as "I'd like to discuss collaborating on a restoration program on your homelands"
 - c. Do not use phrases like "I'm a native Oregonian"
 - d. If your Native or non-Native coworkers bring DEIJ (diversity, equity, inclusion, justice) suggestions to you, do not say things like, "I'm a Democrat, I'm a good person, I don't understand why we have to spend time or money on things like this" because that is white privilege and white ignorance, and your dismissal of that suggestion is rooted in white supremacy.
4. Develop mindful ways of apologizing and rectifying missteps. Instead of saying, "I'm sorry" (which is a static phrase, and often results in an "it's ok" response), practice saying

things like, “I can see that my ignorance/misstep caused some harm/hurt. I feel bad/sad about that, how can I make things right with you?” Asking how hurt can be resolved turns it into an open ended question with the possibility for action.

**I wish to recognize that I do not live and work on my ancestral Indigenous homelands. I encourage readers to open their hearts and minds, do their own research to learn from those Indigenous to where you reside, self-educate, and ask questions of the Indigenous people who are ancestral to place; in this way, I ask forgiveness for any way I have misspoken and welcome any corrections, edits, or additions to this living document by those who have ancestral ties to place.*

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