

# PRINCIPLES AND BEST PRACTICES

for Working with Indigenous Knowledge and Partnering  
with Tribal Nations and Indigenous Peoples



Volume 1: Principles



**Oregon State University**  
College of Forestry



College of Forestry Dean Tom DeLuca collecting soil data with Savannah Spottedbird as part of the BLM Pacific Northwest (PNW) Tribal Forest Restoration and Native Seed Project led by the College of Forestry. Read about this project and more at <https://tek.forestry.oregonstate.edu/tek-lab-projects>

***How do we see the world, through what windows of language, story, and cultural practice? When Native Americans and European Americans peer out through the matrices of their beliefs and assumptions, do we all see the world? If, despite our different practices, our worlds are really the same, how can that world be described without distorting or diminishing it? And if our worlds are different worlds, what are those differences, what do we make of them, how can we celebrate and honor them, what can we learn from them about how we ought to live?***

**Words of V.F. Cordova**



# Introduction

In recent years, partnerships in natural resource research and adaptive management have been growing between Indigenous Peoples and universities. Often supported by federal or state funding, these partnerships bring together multiple ways of knowing to develop solutions to urgent natural resource problems and help create a more sustainable future. However, there remains widespread lack of institutional and academic professional understanding about how to partner ethically with Indigenous Peoples. The College of Forestry strives to be an inclusive, diverse, and caring community of interdisciplinary, multi-cultural scholars who respect and value Tribal partnerships, Indigenous ways of knowing, and relationships with Indigenous Peoples. The principles below provide an effective, proactive, and mutually supportive process built on prioritizing deepening intercultural relationships and helping them flourish in a reciprocal manner. They are intended to apply to all programs in the College of Forestry, including, research, extension, and pedagogy. These principles provide critically important direction for the college when building trusting and sustained relationships with Tribes and Indigenous Peoples.<sup>1</sup>

In November 2022, the United States White House issued directives that all federal and state agencies shall incorporate Indigenous Knowledge (IK) ethically in all programs.<sup>2</sup> This has resulted in rapid expansion of opportunities to partner across cultures with Indigenous Peoples. As a global leader in forestry and sustainability actively engaged in projects that include Indigenous Peoples, the College of Forestry must prioritize defining, establishing, and following exemplary ethical principles and best practices for such partnerships. In response to a request from Dean Thomas H. DeLuca in January 2023, the College of Forestry Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Work Group created the IK and Best Practices for Partnering with Indigenous Communities Task Force. The group's first task was to draft principles and best practices for Government-to-Government partnerships. Such partnerships are relationships in joint work between a federal or state institution, such as Oregon State University and its employees, with Tribal Nations and their members, which involve knowledge transfer including data, written material, guidance, and/or pedagogy. This document represents Volume I: Principles. It will be followed by Volume II: Best Practices, to be drafted in Fall 2023.

## Background

The College of Forestry is part of Oregon State University, a land-grant institution established through the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890. These acts granted federally controlled land to states to support the creation of institutions of higher education. These lands, which were stolen from Indigenous Peoples through genocide and forcible removal to reservations, were sold to raise funds to establish and endow land-grant colleges. This was an outcome of the Doctrine of Discovery, a policy used for centuries to justify colonial conquest of lands that belonged to Indigenous Peoples. Settler colonialism, defined as the act of a settler society stealing the land of an Indigenous population and erasing its culture—using power and authority to develop or exploit the colonized to benefit the colonizers—involves modernizing and/or destroying colonies by force, including genocide. It resulted in the passing of the 1862 and 1890 Morrill Acts, with the objective of eliminating Indigenous societies.<sup>3</sup> Decolonization means reversing the erasure of Indigenous languages, culture, beliefs, and resource stewardship practices; pernicious institutional structures, deep ecological degradation, and intergenerational human trauma created by settler colonialism. Because we live in a settler-colonial world, where all systems are based on settler-colonial practices such as capitalism, decolonization requires systems-based institutional changes.

Oregon State University sits on the traditional lands of the Mary's River, or Ampinefu, Band of the Kalapuya who lived here for millennia. They were forcibly removed to reservations in Western Oregon, and their living descendants are part of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde Community of Oregon and the Confederated Tribes of the Siletz Indians. The College of Forestry community, which includes Extension faculty throughout Oregon, can go beyond the land acknowledgement by accepting the damage done to the Kalapuya and other Indigenous Peoples, and initiate healing by establishing respectful relationships with their descendants that fully acknowledge and honor the sovereignty provided to Tribal Nations by the Tribal Self Governance Act of 1994.<sup>4</sup> Tribal Sovereignty is defined as the right of Indigenous Peoples to Self-Governance and Self-Determination. For non-federally recognized Indigenous communities, rights of Self-Governance and Self-Determination also must be respected.

<sup>1</sup> Cordova, V. F., et al. 2007. edited by Moore, K. D., Peters, K., Jojola, T., Lacy, A., Hogan, L. 2007. *How it Is: The Native American Philosophy of V. F. Cordova*. Oregon State University Press.

<sup>2</sup> White House OSTP CEQ 2022a; 2022b

<sup>3</sup> Pope Alexander VI 1493 ; Miller 2011; Veracini 2011

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Congress 1887; U.S. Congress 1994

# Multiple Ways of Knowing

Indigenous Knowledge (IK, which encompasses Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Indigenous Ecological Knowledge) is knowledge and practices passed from generation to generation informed by cultural memories, sensitivity to change, and values that include reciprocity (defined as taking with the moral responsibility of giving back in equal measure). IK observations are qualitative and quantitative and illustrate that objectivity/subjectivity is a false dichotomy in knowledge generation. IK observations are long-term, often made by persons who hunt, fish, and gather for subsistence and often passed down through generations over millennia. Most importantly, IK is inseparable from a culture's spiritual and social fabric, offering irreplaceable ecocultural knowledge that can be thousands of years old, spanning many generations. Moral values, such as kinship with nature and reciprocity, which can help restore ecosystems, are intertwined in IK systems. IK land-care practices include prescribed burning, and adjusting timber harvest to create more sustainable communities of culturally significant traditional plants that provide wildlife habitat, and in turn, food, medicines, and products for humans.<sup>5</sup>

Scientific Knowledge (SK, also known as Western science) is an inquiry system shaped by Aristotelian logic, Cartesian dualism, empirical observations, and hypothesis testing. In contrast to IK, key attributes of SK are singularity of truth (monism) and objectivity. It is characterized by synchronic (short-term) studies that strive to be value-free (unbiased, amoral) and ideally use systematic, replicated experimentation conducted in isolation, accurate measurements, and empirical tests, which lead to predictive, generalizable statistical models that have credibility and legitimacy.

One of the cornerstones of settler colonialism is singularity of truth—there is one truth to righteously be imposed on the world. SK expresses this belief in many ways. Decolonization involves including, respecting, and honoring multiple ways of knowing. IK and SK represent two very different worldviews that, when braided together, can help us develop the solutions we need to create holistic socio-ecological systems more resilient to global change and heal the damage done by settler colonialism.<sup>6</sup> In basic scientific contexts, such as physics and chemistry, natural laws exist, followed by actions/reactions that are reproducible and measurable objectively in lab settings. In natural scientific contexts (i.e., those outside lab or controlled settings, meaning that they exist in the real world of multiplicity), there may be incomplete SK generation. Other ways of knowing are needed to complement SK. Because of its basic principles, SK has gaps in its effectiveness in informing our understanding of how the world works. IK can fill those gaps and do much more, because it is the original knowledge, developed over millennia of adaptive management of the natural world by humans. Therefore, embracing multiple ways of knowing that provide fuller, more holistic, and richer knowledge is necessary to help guide policy and management for a sustainable future.

## Emerging Policies to Create Environmental Justice for Tribal Nations and Indigenous Peoples

In 2021, the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) and the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) convened an Interagency Working Group with representatives from more than 25 federal departments and agencies. The group sought input from Tribal Nations and Indigenous Peoples through Tribal consultation and listening sessions. Over a one-year period, they engaged over 1,000 individuals, organizations, and Tribal Nations in this process. The resulting Office of the President Memorandum to heads of agencies, published in November 2022, outlines requirements for federal departments and agencies on partnering with Tribal Nations. Presidential Memoranda are documents directed to, and that govern actions by, government officials and agencies, but are less formal than executive orders and not required to be published in the Federal Register.

Framed as a series of “should” statements, the November 2022 Presidential Memorandum, Guidance for Federal Agencies and Departments on Indigenous Knowledge, contains emerging policy promising a new era of Indigenous Self-Determination and Tribal Sovereignty in the U.S. While some of the laws ostensibly supporting Indigenous Self-Determination and Tribal Sovereignty have been in place for well-over a century, such as the Dawes Act of 1887,<sup>7</sup> they have been enforced very poorly and inconsistently, without inclusive practices. The latest federal policy memoranda pertaining to IK and Tribal partnerships make the strongest statements to date in the U.S. about the importance of IK and the need to respect the rights of Indigenous Peoples. These memoranda give standing and validity to IK that is equal to SK. This is the first time the Office of the President has issued such decolonized statements in the form of Presidential Memoranda.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Kimmerer 2013*

<sup>6</sup> *Kimmerer 2000; Mason et al. 2011*

<sup>7</sup> *U.S. Congress, Dawes Act of 1887*

<sup>8</sup> *White House OSTP CEQ 2021a, 2021b; White House OSTP CEQ 2022a, 2022b*

# Principles and Best Practices for Working with Indigenous Knowledge and Partnering with Tribal Nations and Indigenous Peoples

## Volume 1: Principles

The following principles are specific to the College of Forestry and reflect our unique identity as a global leader in forestry and interdisciplinary, multi-cultural, systems-thinking sustainability science. The college's Principles and Best Practices for Working with Indigenous Knowledge and Partnering with Tribal Nations and Indigenous Peoples are strongly informed by: 1) White House OSTP CEQ policies; 2) the [College of Forestry Strategic Plan 2023 – 2027](#) Vision, Mission, and Goals, which are strongly infused with Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) values; and 3) interdisciplinary STEM education, research, and applied science interests of the college community.<sup>9</sup> They apply broadly to Indigenous Peoples globally with whom the college may want to partner. This engagement should not be limited to federally recognized Tribal Nations, and should include Native Hawaiians, and other Indigenous Peoples.

These principles fully support academic freedom. They resemble the rules and regulations that must be observed to secure a permit to do research on federal or state land. As is the case with federal or state research permits, Volume I: Principles, provides clear ethical standards. These standards will be further elucidated and illustrated with examples in Volume II: Best Practices.

To grow and maintain relationships supporting IK, it is essential to:

- 1 ..... **Acknowledge the historical context of past injustice: genocide, ethnocide, and ecocide.**<sup>10</sup> Historic federal legislation, such as the Morrill Act, had the goal of recognizing Tribal Sovereignty and subsequently systematically assimilating and displacing Indigenous Peoples and eradicating their cultures. Tribal Nations and Indigenous Peoples continue to experience the impacts of intergenerational trauma resulting from this violent legacy.
- 2 ..... **Practice early and sustained engagement with Tribal Nations and/or Tribal knowledge holders.** Engagement should begin before the earliest phase of developing a research proposal, management plan or outreach effort, with foundational relationship-building activities that will then support joint efforts. In the context of Oregon State University College of Forestry member actions, listening instead of telling is important, as is asking what is desired by the Tribal members in terms of a relationship. This cultural humility also pertains to planning community events with Tribal partners, developing OSU Extension projects with or led by Tribal communities, and asking Indigenous individuals for advice about IK.
- 3 ..... **Earn and maintain trusting relationships by being transparent, open about ideas and agendas, and honest at all times, in all forms of communication.** Earning this trust requires creating a decolonized, safe space for engagement of Tribal Nations and other Indigenous Peoples. It also requires allowing ample time for them to respond. It is exploitative to approach a Tribal Nation or Indigenous colleague at the last moment with a fully drafted research proposal and ask them to sign on as a Tribal partner or co-principal investigator. This is an inappropriate way to secure funding for research because it tokenizes Tribal Nations and Indigenous Peoples. Intentionality to partner ethically should be expressed as early as possible and should be stated as part of the impact statement that is typically required for proposals.
- 4 ..... **Respect different processes and worldviews.** Indigenous communities may have vastly different and diverse ways of doing business than how business is done in the settler-colonial world. These differences include an expectation that the entire Tribal community be involved in decision-making, including Elders and youth. This inclusiveness is vital to Tribal Governance and community. Each Tribal Nation and Indigenous community has different culture and governance policies. Deliverables and products that are part of Tribal partnerships may be on a longer timeframe than the two-to-three-year timeframe common in SK, because Tribal Nations and Indigenous Peoples carefully guard information about their homelands and their cultural connections to them. To avoid unintentional cultural appropriation and exploitation, recognize and respect divergent processes and worldviews, and the sensitivity of Tribes about sharing certain information.

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<sup>9</sup>College of Forestry Strategic Plan 2023 – 2027 <https://www.forestry.oregonstate.edu/about/strategic-plan>

<sup>10</sup>Ecocide is defined as unlawful or wanton acts committed with knowledge that there is a substantial likelihood of severe and either widespread or long-term damage to the environment being caused by those acts (Sarliève 2021).

- 5 ..... Recognize, respond to, and adapt to challenges with cultural humility.** These challenges include: deep mistrust; lack of funding, personnel, and capacity among Tribes and Indigenous Peoples to respond to external requests to engage; lack of coordination and communication between external government agencies or external partners in reaching out to Tribes and Indigenous Peoples; changes in external and Tribal political administrations, budgets, and leadership priorities; and poor telecommunications infrastructure in rural areas. Some of these challenges arise from settler colonialism. Those seeking to partner with Tribal Nations and Indigenous Peoples must be dedicated to responding to these challenges at individual and institutional levels with cultural humility. Cultural humility is the ongoing process of self-exploration and self-critique and willingness to learn from others. In entering a relationship with another person, it involves honoring their values, beliefs, and customs, and accepting that person for who they are.
- 6 ..... Consider supporting co-management and co-stewardship structures.** These approaches bring Tribal Nations directly into decision-making. Co-management is a partnership whereby the government shares power with resource users, with clearly specified rights and responsibilities for each party relating to management and decision-making. Co-stewardship is broader and refers to a range of working relationships with Tribal Nations, as well as Tribal consortia and Tribal-led entities exercising the delegated authority of federally recognized Tribes. Tribal co-management and co-stewardship require a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), defined as a Government-to-Government agreement that establishes standards of partnership; or a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA), defined as a document written between parties to cooperatively work on an agreed upon project that involves a transfer of funds.<sup>11</sup> Resulting partnerships may help avoid challenges around and breaches of confidentiality or data, and imbalances in power and resources. Co-stewardship can be part of relationships building. Co-management must be consistent and relevant and may not be feasible in all scenarios.
- 7 ..... Pursue co-production of knowledge. Knowledge co-production is a research framework based on equity and the inclusion of multiple knowledge systems.** It requires full partnership of Tribes and Indigenous Peoples in all aspects of a research endeavor from the outset, including ensuring that Tribal and Indigenous collaborators are compensated for their work. True knowledge co-production requires participation of a Tribal Nation in project leadership and decision-making from the genesis of research ideas to project completion, and authorship in publications. This participation continues through implementation/application of said knowledge (e.g., adaptive-management plans).
- 8 ..... Provide ample funding to Tribal Nations and Indigenous Peoples for involvement at each step of partnership and knowledge co-creation.** Only engage with a Tribal Nation or Indigenous individual in a research partnership if you are prepared to fund their participation in any partnerships created. A primary goal of all research proposals that include Tribal Nations and Indigenous Peoples should be to build capacity within these communities by providing funding (e.g., jobs, fully funded STEM education, and other opportunities for personal and professional growth). Partnership outcomes should support the Tribe's social, economic, and cultural goals and priorities. For example, a project could take steps to incorporate youth engagement, support intergenerational knowledge transfer, or otherwise support the health and wellbeing of Tribal members. The project may also be adjusted to support decision-making, applications, and power-sharing aligned with the Tribe's goals.
- 9 ..... Share power and decision-making authority with partnering Tribes and Indigenous Peoples.** Be honest and transparent about any limitations regarding the ability to share such power. Avoid creating expectations regarding future outcomes that project leadership is not certain of achieving or is not within your authority to grant. When developing methods and data-collection protocols, researchers and managers should consider using Indigenous methodologies and incorporating Indigenous metrics and indicators to fully include IK in the research results. Tribal partners and Indigenous Peoples will have strong sensitivity around sharing IK with external partners until trust is built. Building trust requires creating supporting legal documents for work on Tribal lands, or that involves IK obtained from Tribal knowledge keepers on non-Tribal lands, such as an MOU and Data Sharing Agreement (DSA), defined as a formal contract that clearly documents the data being shared and the parameters under which those data may be used, or a Non-disclosure Agreement (NDA), defined as a contract by which one or more parties agree not to disclose confidential information that they have shared with each other as a necessary part of working together. At the conclusion of the research, the results should be reviewed by the partnering Tribe or Indigenous Peoples and shared in ways that are meaningful and useful to them and the broader scientific community. This includes having Tribal members and Indigenous Peoples as co-authors of published peer-reviewed literature.

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<sup>11</sup>Nie 2008

Clearly established policies, as described in the above principles, that acknowledge and respect Sovereignty Rights and enter into Government-to-Government relations with MOUs, MOAs, DSAs, and other types of formal legal agreements are essential to creating healthy intercultural relationships. Because funding is frequently provided for research by federal or state agencies, these policies apply to scientists and all types of faculty and students working within academic institutions and non-governmental organizations intending to partner with Tribal Nations or Indigenous Peoples.<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion

In the introduction to the College of Forestry Strategic Plan 2023 – 2027, Dean DeLuca states that, “This is a pivotal time for forestry and humankind and the College of Forestry’s leadership is needed more than ever before. . . We are committed to building an inclusive culture at the college and identifying and removing barriers to provide equitable access to research, learning, and engagement. We are ready to accelerate our work to create thriving ecosystems, economies, and communities.”<sup>13</sup>

The Principles and Best Practices for Working with Indigenous Knowledge and Partnering with Tribal Nations and Indigenous Peoples were drafted in direct response to the College of Forestry Strategic Plan 2023 – 2027 call to action to help us move into a more equitable and inclusive future. Meaningful adoption of these policies and principles will require significant learning, investment, and adaptation of existing procedures within our institution. The college is moving boldly into the future by continuing to strengthen our research centers, institutes, laboratories, and programs, and build research partnerships to advance knowledge and co-create sustainable and equitable solutions to issues facing forest landscapes, ecosystems, societies, and communities. To fully support the innovative, interdisciplinary, intercultural work we are doing together, individuals at all levels of the College of Forestry must develop a strong commitment to incorporating the principles and practices for partnering with Tribal Nations and Indigenous Peoples, and to embracing Native values of reciprocity, humility, and respect.



*College of Forestry Indigenous Natural Resource Office staff and TEK Lab students in April 2023, left to right: Brooklyn Richards, Allison Monroe, Ashley Russell, Dr. Cristina Eisenberg, Dr. Gail Woodside, Tessa Chesonis*

<sup>12</sup>Moller 2004; Mason et al. 2012; Lake et al. 2017; Lake 2021

<sup>13</sup>College of Forestry Strategic Plan 2023 – 2027

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