

The Nature Conservancy in Maine's Commitment to Collaborating with Indigenous Peoples



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Since time immemorial, Indigenous Peoples have developed and maintained sophisticated knowledge systems and management practices that define their relationships with their homelands. A common principle amongst Indigenous worldviews is the reciprocal relationship between all life – plants, animals, and humans – and how we all need each other to carry out our unique roles in order to thrive. Decision-making often considers how the actions taken today will impact the next seven generations, noting the long-lasting effects for people and nature.

The historic and modern practices of conservation have suppressed Indigenous knowledge and authority. This has not only had detrimental effects on Indigenous communities, but also on conservation communities, which have not benefited from the deep knowledge and relationship with the land that Indigenous People have had for millennia. When Indigenous communities have the authority to manage lands and waters, it leads to more sustained conservation and stronger, more vibrant human and natural communities. At The Nature Conservancy in Maine (TNC Maine), we recognize that if we are to succeed in our mission to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends, we must increase tribal decision-making authority, access to lands and waters, and inclusion of Indigenous knowledge in all phases of conservation.

As one of the largest landowners in the State of Maine and as an organization with global capacity, we not only have the opportunity to work with Tribal partners to advance the health of our shared natural world, but we also have the responsibility to do so. By building relationships with Wabanaki people and shifting how we work, TNC Maine is poised to support real change and accomplish tangible, inclusive, and lasting conservation outcomes.

This document outlines four approaches central to our commitment and offers examples from TNC Maine's existing partnerships with Wabanaki communities. Though often referred to as one collective community throughout this document, TNC Maine understands that Wabanaki people bring multiple perspectives, and that each Tribal Nation and the citizen members of each tribe can hold differing or opposing views. Our ongoing learning and deeper collaboration with the Wabanaki people and Indigenous communities will support our efforts to create a world where all people and nature thrive.



Our Guiding Principles

Respect for people, communities, and cultures is a core value of The Nature Conservancy. Enduring conservation success depends on the active involvement of people and partners whose lives and livelihoods are linked to the natural systems we seek to conserve. We forge relationships based on mutual support and trust. Our work with Indigenous Peoples is no exception, and is furthermore guided by the following principles:

- Trust-building and trustworthiness forms the foundation of our work with Indigenous Peoples.
- Our work respects Indigenous rights and reinforces Indigenous Peoples' efforts towards self-determination and well-being.
- We do not speak for Indigenous Peoples. Working together, we can elevate their voices and priorities and advance our shared goals.
- Our work aims to build rather than burden the capacity of our Indigenous partners.
- Our work aims to restore a reciprocal relationship with nature.
- We approach all this work with persistence and commitment to the time it will require.

The following approaches reflect these guiding principles and are based on our current, imperfect understanding. The approaches have been informed by the work we have done to date, and we commit to revisiting this document to adjust and make revisions every two years based on our continued learning and input from our Indigenous partners.

1. Increasing Wabanaki Access to and Use of Lands and Waters

TNC Maine is committed to facilitating new Tribal land acquisitions and increasing Tribal access to TNC preserves and public and private conservation lands and waters by:

- serving on the [Conservation Community Delegation](#) in service to the [Wabanaki Commission on Land and Stewardship, Nil yut ktahkomiq nik](#), and being a liaison to the larger conservation community;
- supporting the capacity and priorities established by the Wabanaki Commission;
- supporting land acquisition priorities for each of the Wabanaki Tribes in Maine, potentially including transfers of TNC Maine preserves;
- supporting conservation, restoration, and natural resource management priorities for each of the Wabanaki Tribes in Maine; and
- establishing mechanisms to increase access to TNC Maine preserves and other lands for Wabanaki harvest and/or other cultural purposes (e.g., cultural use agreements or co-management).

2. Strengthening Authority and Self-Determination of the Wabanaki Tribes

TNC Maine is committed to strengthening the authority and self-determination of the Wabanaki Tribes of Maine by:

- supporting and advancing state and federal legislation to recognize the inherent sovereignty of the Wabanaki Tribes;
- recognizing and supporting Wabanaki environmental and cultural priorities; and
- encouraging opportunities for Wabanaki representation and leadership in conservation efforts.

3. Transforming the Definition and Practice of Conservation by Integrating Indigenous Knowledge and Perspectives

TNC Maine is committed to establishing and supporting the co-creation of research and conservation practices that are inclusive of Indigenous knowledge and worldviews and elevate Tribal communities as leaders in conservation by:

- establishing pathways to engage Wabanaki cultural advisors early on during key conservation projects, collaborative research, and data management, including support of cultural resource inventory work throughout the state (brown ash, sweetgrass, etc.);
- collaborating with WaYS to build capacity for engaging Wabanaki youth and young adults in science, conservation research and employment (this could include internships and/or support of cultural knowledge sharers who are paired with youth throughout their education);
- coordinating with the University of Maine to support Wabanaki-led research projects and researchers (such as graduate work underway at the University of Maine to inventory, collect, and store brown ash seed in Maine);
- implementing Land Acknowledgements at gatherings when appropriate; and
- including Wabanaki acknowledgement, history, and place names on TNC Maine produced materials (preserve signage, media, publications, etc.).

4. Building Competence & Capacity to Partner with Wabanaki People

TNC Maine is committed to increasing our competency and capacity to better partner with Wabanaki people by:

- creating a shared understanding among TNC Maine staff, Trustees, and funders of how and why TNC works with Wabanaki partners and the potential outcomes of this collaboration;

- establishing a foundation of knowledge and skills to identify and improve organizational practices and policies to better support Indigenous Peoples and achieve our commitments;
- striving toward Wabanaki representation and leadership among TNC Maine's Board of Trustees and staff; and
- supporting the TNC North America Indigenous and Local Communities (ILC) strategy and telling stories of our learning to help foster a broader shift in the work of conservation.



Conclusion

TNC Maine is committed to sustained, informed, and deliberate work with and in support of Wabanaki people towards shared priorities. This includes increasing Wabanaki access to and use of lands and waters; strengthening authority and self-determination of the Wabanaki Tribes; transforming the definition and practice of conservation by integrating Indigenous knowledge and perspectives; and building competence and capacity to partner with Wabanaki People. We are guided in this work by principles that are rooted in respect and focused on building relationships based on mutual support and trust. We aspire to transform our practice of conservation so that it engages and supports Wabanaki people across all our work, unlocking more robust and sustainable outcomes for nature and the planet.





With Gratitude...

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Any limitations, shortcomings, or errors in this document are the responsibility of our team, and not of these reviewers.



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