

Land Acknowledgments

Land acknowledgments have become a widespread practice for many organizations and government in Nova Scotia. They are a way to recognize and honour the past, present, and future contributions of L'nu'k (Mi'kmaq), the Indigenous people of Mi'kma'ki (Mee-gmah-gi).

Mi'kma'ki is the traditional territory of Mi'kmaq and includes seven districts which are found in what is now known as Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Quebec (Gaspé Peninsula), New Brunswick (North of the St. John River watershed), parts of Newfoundland and parts of Maine, US . For thousands of years, Mi'kmaq traveled throughout Mi'kma'ki, and to other territories, carrying with them stories and teachings. Moving throughout the land for trade and resources, as well as establishing relationships with neighbouring nations. Present day mapping and borders didn't exist, there were natural boundaries in the landscape such as rivers, mountains, or watersheds that marked the territory they were in or traveled across.

While a land acknowledgement and territorial welcome may be something new to those who are not Indigenous, Indigenous people have engaged in this practice for centuries. While Indigenous Peoples have diverse cultures, they all share a foundational connection to the land. The private ownership of land (as part of a larger system of wealth accumulation) is not an Indigenous concept. In other words, the idea that land can be owned, monetized, bought, and sold is an idea that arrived with the settlers of Turtle Island. It was further customary practice to acknowledge yourself as a visitor to the area that you did not steward. If there were no family connections, meetings with leadership would occur so the visitor could share their intentions.

It is also important to understand that prior to contact, Indigenous groups occupied every piece of modern-day North America. Setting up their own community structures, land boundaries, and laws and regulations, they participated in nation-to-nation building. They also had an active commerce that was set up and agreed upon, within the nation-to-nation treaties that were signed.

Mi'kmaq, being familiar with treaties and the process of treaty making, in the 18th century entered Peace and Friendship Treaties with the British Crown. These treaties were established on the premises of nation-to-nation relationship building. Today, acknowledging traditional territory is a way of showing respect for and honouring our shared Treaty relationship. It is an important step towards reconciliation and not intended to create any legally binding obligations or recognition of asserted claims.

Things to consider when creating a land acknowledgment

While we regularly receive a lot of requests to prescribe a land acknowledgement, we believe that exploring the following questions will help support you in creating a land acknowledgement that supports your own reconciliation journey and understanding of our shared history. Consider the following questions.

- Start with self-reflection. Why am I doing this land acknowledgment? How does this acknowledgement relate to the event or work I am doing? Are you trying to educate and inspire yourself and others to support Indigenous communities? If shame and guilt are your motivators or you're doing it because everyone else is, more self-reflection is advised.
- What is my goal? What do you hope listeners do after hearing the acknowledgment? For example, who are the First Peoples of this place; the history of the land and related treaties; names of living and ancestral L'nu, especially related to the area of field you are working in; L'nu place names and language.
- What is my relationship to this territory? How did I come to be here?
- What does it mean to be a Treaty person? What are my responsibilities as a Treaty person?

Intention, authenticity, and an understanding of our shared history are foundational in developing a land acknowledgement. Land acknowledgements are insignificant if they are made without substance. Therefore, each land acknowledgement may be varied in its development and delivery. They are meant to be personal and meaningful. Organizations and institutions can collectively reflect on the above questions in developing their own acknowledgment.

While land acknowledgments are important and appropriate, take care to ensure your land acknowledgement is not a performative piece or a piece that is simply put together to tick a box of required tasks. It's important that the intention of a land acknowledgement is not lost by obscuring it. Sometimes the simplest is the most effective. Always be mindful of your intentions.

What is the difference between a land acknowledgement and territorial welcome?

- A welcome to territory is something an Indigenous person may do when on their home territory to welcome guests to the territory.
- A land acknowledgement is something that a non-Indigenous person or visiting Indigenous person may do.

Who may acknowledge Mi'kmaw territory? Who may welcome?

- Only Mi'kmaq people should *welcome* others to Mi'kma'ki, their traditional territory.
- All other speakers may choose to *acknowledge* Nova Scotia is Mi'kmaw traditional territory.

When are land acknowledgments and territorial welcomes appropriate?

- Land acknowledgements are usually the first item during a gathering, or at the start of a speech, event, or presentation.
- The concept to remember is if people from outside your internal group will be present then a land acknowledgment could be provided (see below).

Why should we acknowledge Mi'kmaw traditional territory?

- A meaningful land acknowledgement is done with intention, authenticity and understanding of the Treaty relationship, and demonstrates respect and friendship.
- It is a means of recognizing the truth of our shared history, while offering a commitment to walk the path of reconciliation.

- It is a way to express the motto “We are all Treaty people” and recognize our relationship is based on peace and friendship.

On what occasions could Mi'kmaw traditional territory be acknowledged?

- An acknowledgement is usually the first item at public events, e.g., public workshops, conferences, or ceremonies, or at the start of a speech or formal presentation.
- Once an initial land acknowledgment or territorial welcome is made, it may not be necessary for every subsequent speaker to follow suit.
- Land acknowledgements may not be needed in every situation. For example, they aren't typically part of regular day-to-day gatherings, meetings, or training.
- Before including an acknowledgement in a print document, it is recommended to seek advice from the Office of L'nu Affairs.

On what occasions might a territorial welcome be appropriate?

- For large events, a Mi'kmaw Elder (or community member) may be invited to provide an opening and share a welcome, prayer, song and/or smudge.
 - o It is acceptable to provide honorariums to Elders and speakers. Honorariums / fees should be discussed in advance.
 - o A gift of loose tobacco wrapped in red cloth is customarily offered to an Elder following their welcome as a way of demonstrating respect and honour. If you do not have a contact to help with this, it is best to reach out to the nearest Mi'kmaw community, organization, or the Office of L'nu Affairs.
- For smaller events or presentations, an acknowledgment of traditional territory may be more appropriate.

Why do people sometimes use the terms *unceded* or *unsurrendered* when they make a land acknowledgement or do a territorial welcome?

- While many historical treaties in Canada involved Indigenous people ceding, releasing, or surrendering their rights to land in return for specific rights outlined within the terms of the negotiated treaty, the Treaties of Peace and Friendship signed by British and Mi'kmaq in the 1700s contain no cede, release, and surrender language, or express surrender of land rights.
- These treaties were negotiated by British colonial officials in a context defined by the end of the Seven Years' War between Britain and France and a mutual desire between Mi'kmaq and British colonial officials to establish peaceful trade relations.
- Mi'kmaq, including in Nova Scotia, take great pride in the distinctiveness of the Peace and Friendship treaties.

If the Treaties of Peace and Friendship do not contain *cede*, *release*, and *surrender* language, shouldn't land acknowledgements include the words *unceded* and *unsurrendered*?

- For Indigenous people, these words may hold deeply rooted meaning and they may choose to use this language and place emphasis on their connection to the land.
- True understanding of our Treaty relationship requires meaningful, nuanced, and sometimes uncomfortable dialogue.
- Adopting the use of the terms *unceded* or *unsurrendered* in a land acknowledgement may oversimplify complex issues related to land rights.
- Mi'kmaq land rights and the foundation of British and Canadian sovereignty is a complex issue that draws on historical and legal concepts that extend beyond what may be articulated in a treaty.
- We have a *Made-in-Nova-Scotia* negotiation process, formally established in 2007, which involves Mi'kmaq, Provincial, and Federal representatives actively exploring and implementing rights around land and treaties.

- To understand our relationship with Mi'kmaq regarding land and the path forward for reconciliation, we need to do more than express words or phrases at the beginning of events. Saying Mi'kmaq territory is unceded or unsurrendered is not alone sufficient to comprehend our relationship with Mi'kmaq regarding land and the path forward for reconciliation.

While we mentioned earlier our intention to avoid being prescriptive in the creation of land acknowledgments, here are examples of simple land acknowledgments that you might use as a starting place on your journey to create something that works for you.

Sample Acknowledgments:

I acknowledge we are in Mi'kma'ki, (Mee-gmah-gi) the territory of the Mi'kmaq. As a Treaty person, I am committed to reconciliation.

We are in the traditional, ancestral lands of the Mi'kmaq, known as Mi'kma'ki (Mee-gmah-gi).