

Creating a Land Acknowledgement Policy for ASOR

DEI Committee Recommendation

Revised October 17, 2023

What is a Land Acknowledgement?

A land acknowledgment is a formal statement that recognizes and respects Indigenous peoples as traditional stewards of settled lands and the enduring relationship that exists between Indigenous peoples and their traditional territories.¹ Land acknowledgements have grown in popularity in the last decade and are routinely employed at the opening of public gatherings, on organizational websites, in email signatures, and other formats.

This recent proliferation of land acknowledgements has led to condemnation that they can be performative or tokenizing. Best practices around land acknowledgments avoid this criticism by making actionable statements, promising further engagement, and promoting Indigenous perspectives in other contexts. Land acknowledgements must also avoid historicizing Indigenous peoples and celebrate their contemporary and future presence. Furthermore, land acknowledgements are a valid first step toward building awareness, visibility, and relationships with native peoples that can lead to more meaningful engagement.

Notably, the American Anthropological Association paused their use of land acknowledgements in 2021 and established a task force to review the policies at the request of the Association for Indigenous Archaeologists. However, AAA had used an acknowledgment for a long time and has different resources and audiences than ASOR; it was appropriate for them to pause in an action which had outlived its utility and become performative. Sobo et al (2021) state that land acknowledgements are not *enough* (emphasis added); not that they should not be used. Other learned societies use Land Acknowledgements in various ways. For example, the Society of American Archaeology includes a land acknowledgement authored by the local advisory committee and the SAA Committee on Native American Relations in the program of its annual meeting. The American Library Association, with offices in Chicago, provides information on the histories and present-day Indigenous people of Chicago on their website.² And Mayra Rivera's presidential address at AAR's 2022 Annual Meeting began with a brief land acknowledgement.³

In short, land acknowledgements are recognition of Native American presence and sovereignty; they are not an end point or themselves sufficient. They should cause discomfort and introspection among the acknowledging communities who write and read them, while validating

¹ Indigenous in this report refers to the Native peoples of North America and their past, present, and future descendents, also known as Native Americans, First Nations, or First Peoples.

² <https://www.ala.org/aboutala/offices/diversity/chicago-indigenous>

³ [2022 AAR Presidential Address by Mayra Rivera](#)

the Native voices and perspectives they profess to uplift. Developing and using a land acknowledgment for the Annual Meeting and the ASOR headquarters in Alexandria, Virginia will help fulfill the vision of the DEI Committee that ASOR be a leader among professional scholarly organizations in matters of equity and inclusion.

Why does ASOR need a land acknowledgement?

The Honor Native Land Guide provides eight reasons for developing and using a land acknowledgment:

- Offer recognition and respect.
- Counter the “doctrine of discovery” with the true story of the people who were already here.
- Create a broader public awareness of the history that has led to this moment.
- Begin to repair relationships with Native communities and with the land.
- Support larger truth-telling and reconciliation efforts.
- Remind people that colonization is an ongoing process, with Native lands still occupied due to deceptive and broken treaties.
- Take a cue from Indigenous protocol, opening up space with reverence and respect.
- Inspire ongoing action and relationship.

As discussed above, the emphasis is on land acknowledgement as an initial step and small gesture on its own. Land acknowledgments are foundational early work for institutions to inaugurate and sustain their DEI journeys.

We acknowledge that ASOR has an international membership and works in areas with different relationships to settler colonial dynamics. The reasons for a land acknowledgement, and its history and adoption in US organizations, may not be as clear to our international members. That audience should be considered as ASOR rolls out its land acknowledgement program and process. However, we affirm that as a predominantly American organization - as indicated by the retention of “American” in the organization’s name in 2021 - a land acknowledgement is appropriate and necessary.

What land acknowledgements do we need?

The committee recommends that ASOR consistently employ two land acknowledgements: one for use at the Annual Meeting, starting with Chicago 2023, and a second representing the ASOR office in Alexandria, Virginia. Virtual programs, representing the ASOR office, shall use the Alexandria acknowledgement, although featured speakers may wish to use their own.

How should ASOR develop a land acknowledgment?

The recommended process for developing land acknowledgments for the Annual Meeting venues and for the ASOR Alexandria office are different, as the relationship of ASOR with those lands is different.

For Annual Meetings

Because ASOR does not have an ongoing and abiding relationship with the territories in which Annual Meetings are held, we recommend that ASOR work with member institutions and individuals based in the cities in which the Annual Meeting is held to develop one-time land acknowledgements for use at the Annual Meeting. This process has already started for the 2023 Chicago meeting. In seeking local models, ASOR should use the following criteria:

- Prioritize Native-run organizations and Native-produced resources
- Look for models from predominantly white organizations with demonstrated evidence of working directly with Native communities to develop their statements or, preferably, which have turned the process entirely over to those communities
- Utilize the resources of Native Land Digital (<https://native-land.ca/>) to identify and understand the territories, languages, and treaties of a given location

While it may be best practice to connect with Indigenous people and representatives of displaced tribes, these organizations report being overworked and overwhelmed by such requests for often unpaid labor by institutions seeking to uplift themselves and not the people with whom they are working. The burden to do research and understand the history rests with predominantly white organizations like ASOR, not on the Indigenous communities who have been perpetually harmed by those organizations.

The annual development of Annual Meeting Land Acknowledgments should be led by a subcommittee of the DEI Committee, in collaboration with the Program Committee and local members and organizations. On occasions in which a land acknowledgement has been developed in a previous year, the subcommittee should review and update it in light of current best practice.

For the Alexandria Office

The development and deployment of a land acknowledgement for the ASOR Alexandria office will, and should, be a longer process that allows for engagement with Indigenous communities and Native American-led organizations. In order to facilitate sustained engagement, the DEI Committee recommends that this work be undertaken by ASOR Staff based in the Alexandria office, under the guidance of the DEI Committee. ASOR staff based in Alexandria have stronger connections to that land and a professional standing with ASOR, as opposed to the volunteer committees with members living in different areas. This also gives ASOR staff ownership of a concrete and actionable DEI task, in order to build DEI capacity.

The Committee recommends that staff and others involved in drafting a land acknowledgement pursue the following steps:

- Familiarize themselves with the bibliography and toolkits listed below

- Explore the resources in Native Land Digital for the area around Alexandria, as well as other well known places (e.g. the place you grew up, a favorite vacation spot)
- Reflect, as individuals or a group, on the following questions:⁴
 - Why is this acknowledgement happening?
 - How does this acknowledgement relate to the work of ASOR?
 - What is the history of this territory? What are the impacts of colonialism here? Did anything surprise you in your research on the history of this location?
 - What is your relationship to this territory? How did you come to be here?
 - What are ways ASOR can disrupt and dismantle colonialism beyond this territory acknowledgement?
- Benchmark other predominantly white organizations in Alexandria that have developed land acknowledgements
- Identify local Indigenous-led organizations as potential partners
 - As time and resources permit, begin a discussion - how do the missions of these organizations and ASOR relate to each other? What are ways the groups can inform and affirm one another's work?
 - NB: whenever there is a specific request, emotional labor, or real work involved in engagement with community members, compensation should be offered up front.
- Draft an acknowledgement; get feedback; prepare for it to evolve and change.
- Consider and commit to next steps in supporting engagement with Indigenous communities

How should ASOR use these land acknowledgements?

Honor Native Land “calls on all individuals and organizations to open public events and gatherings with acknowledgment of the traditional Native inhabitants of the land.”

At the Annual Meeting, the city-specific land acknowledgement for the Annual Meeting should be printed or read aloud:

- 1) In the front matter of the printed and digital program
- 2) By the President at the Plenary Address
- 3) In the first day of the program (Thursday) email blast to registrants
- 4) On the Annual Meeting webpage

For the ASOR Office, the land acknowledgment should be:

- 1) Included in the “About” section of the website
- 2) Posted in a visible location in the office building, such as a main entrance or lobby
- 3) Read at the beginning of any public event with more than 15 people, either in Alexandria or virtually

⁴ Adopted from <https://native-land.ca/resources/territory-acknowledgement/>

4) Read at the beginning of Board of Trustees meetings

Timeline

“Starting somewhere is better than not trying at all. We need to share in Indigenous peoples’ discomfort. They’ve been uncomfortable for a long time. Dr. Kate Beane (Flandreau Santee Dakota and Muskogee Creek) says, ‘We have to try. Starting out with good intentions and a good heart is what matters most.’ ” *Native Governance Center*

It takes time and intention to develop a thoughtful land acknowledgement that does not perpetuate harm. Yet that should not be used as a delaying tactic. As stated by the Native Governance Center, “Every moment spent agonizing over land acknowledgment wording is time that could be used to actually support Indigenous people.” **A land acknowledgment is not a fixed or endpoint, but rather a milestone along ASOR’s DEI journey.**

After preliminary discussion at the Chairs Coordinating Committee meeting in October, the decision was made to advance the intention to develop a land acknowledgment for discussion at the Board of Trustees meeting in November. The below timeline provides a roadmap for the approval of the plan and statement for deployment at the 2024 Annual Meeting in Boston.

August-September 2023

- DEI plan created and endorsed by the DEI Committee
- Preliminary ASOR staff research and benchmarking on acknowledgement for Alexandria office

October 2023

- Land Acknowledgement drafted for Chicago
- Discussion of Land Acknowledgement Plan at CCC Meeting

November 2023

- Discussion of Land Acknowledgement Plan and sample statement and messaging for Chicago by Board of Trustees

If plan approved to move forward:

December 2023-January 2024

- Initial meeting with ASOR staff and DEI subcommittee to discuss land acknowledgement for Alexandria
- Begin benchmarking work on Boston 2024 land acknowledgment with local partners
- Reach out to Indigenous organizations in Alexandria area

February 2024

- Second ASOR staff meeting to discuss land acknowledgement and reflect on the relationship of ASOR to native peoples of North America; identify potential Native American-led organizations to partner with
- Draft Alexandria land acknowledgment
- Finalize Boston land acknowledgement

March 2024

- Complete initial Alexandria land acknowledgment; incorporate Native American feedback as available
- Submit Boston and Alexandria land acknowledgements to Board for discussion at April meeting

April 2024

- Board discussion of Boston and Alexandria land acknowledgment text and usage

If acknowledgements approved to move forward:

May 2024 and ongoing

- Deploy Boston Annual Meeting usage (website, program)
- Deploy Alexandria usage plan (website, office, events)

Bibliography and Further Resources

“A Guide to Indigenous Land Acknowledgement,” Native Governance Center, October 22, 2019. <https://nativegov.org/news/a-guide-to-indigenous-land-acknowledgment/>

“Honor Native Land: A Guide and Call to Acknowledgment,” U.S. Department of Arts and Culture, 2017. <https://usdac.us/nativeland>

“Land Acknowledgement: You’re on California Indian Land, Now What? Acknowledging Relationships to Space & Place Toolkit.” California State University San Marcos, June 28, 2019. <https://www.csusm.edu/cicsc/land.pdf>

UCLA Land Acknowledgement Guidelines,

<https://ucla.app.box.com/s/o1texo5yt7qelrelhnzy150jhjugo5mi>

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Sobo, Elisa, Michael C. Lambert, and Valerie L. Lambert. "Land Acknowledgments Are Not Enough." SAPIENS. October 20, 2021. <https://www.sapiens.org/culture/land-acknowledgments-sovereignty/>.