

## Native Protocol

Dear reader. Kwe. I am white turtle woman. I would like to take this opportunity to offer some reflections based on my observations and experiences as a native woman living and working in the dominant society of what is called “Canada” that doesn’t always understand or appreciate my nativeness.

As more and more organizations and committees strive to more accurately represent the whole community they live and work in, I would like to offer these thoughts on Native Protocol so more people understand better how to plan and carry out meetings and exchanges between Natives and non-Natives.

These reflections are based on my own experiences of living in your society over the years and include my work out of the Nova Scotia based Tatamagouche Centre, specifically around social justice work and building respectful relationships between native and non native peoples.

I learned early on that building respectful relationships is not just a matter of bringing people together and expecting good results. There is too much racism and oppression suffered by one side, and too much history and fear on both sides, as well as a lot of complicated emotions and realities that need to be acknowledged.

These new relationships begin most successfully when people enter into them with prior awareness and intentionality.

It is not my intention to try to speak for all native people. Nor is this reflection piece meant to be inclusive to all protocols.

My hope is to create some understanding, awareness, and opportunities for discussions to happen between yourselves before you even invite a native person in. I have learned that assuming everyone is on the same page can lead to disaster and then to cultures colliding rather than collaborating.

These reflections are only meant to be a general guide to some basic protocol and information, specifically around general activities. Ceremonial activities have separate protocols which I am not addressing here.

This is merely a recognition ahead of time of the reality that native people live every day. And the moment we leave our community, we really are entering your world.

- Many of us do not consider ourselves Canadian so please don't assume that we do. Canada was created through racist, violent European imperialism by the dominant society/settlers. We belong to Turtle Island and there are many different territories that are recognized by our people. I believe it is a matter of truth and respect that this be stated one way or another.
- Many of us have been raised having lived through and sometimes suffering quite profound harms and violations caused by and with the dominant society/settlers. So, when we participate for the first time, welcome us specifically and do a round of introductions. It can go a long way to building what is a necessary and different type of relationship.
- Our issues with the dominant society/settlers generally began with historical atrocities against our peoples and even though you personally have not participated in that, you still enjoy the benefits today, generations later, while we not only don't enjoy any benefits, rather we still suffer, in multiple-complex ways, the harms and violations.

- Also, those who get to enjoy these historical and ongoing benefits don't always recognize when issues of dominant society/settler privilege and entitlement come into play for us. We see it and react, sometimes by getting angry, sometimes by withdrawing. Pay attention to that because it may be the only chance you will have to invite us back into the circle.
- Should members in your group be in conflict, for whatever reason, we have a tendency to withdraw, often physically, until it is sorted out, so if we disappear suddenly, sort your conflicts out before inviting us back.
- As a matter of policy and practice, please consider using a space that accommodates Smudge if participating native people so choose. That simple Ceremony creates safety for us immediately, and sometimes we need that safety at times that may be surprising to others.
- Don't ask us for something right away. We have a long history of people wanting something from us when we are not always sure of what that is. Take time to build a relationship first. When that happens, please feel free to explain to us how you think this will benefit our community. Let us consider it. Many "gifts" in the past, well-intentioned or not, did much harm. Also, do not assume that we will agree with you. Agreeing about what will "benefit" your communities and ours can only come through careful relationship building and respectful communication and decision making.
- When you do ask us for something, Tobacco offerings are appropriate. A pouch of Pipe Tobacco is most appropriate for Elders and Ceremony Keepers, but regular loose Tobacco wrapped in red cloth is also acceptable. Tobacco is one of our Sacred Medicines and used in our Ceremonies as well as our currency. It shows respect both for us and our culture.
- Offer honorariums whenever possible, even if only to cover transportation costs. We often have to make a choice between feeding our families or attending your function.
- Recognizing that there are different cultural traditions that use alcohol, please be aware that alcohol has historically been used as an effective weapon against us to both to steal our lands and later on, and continuing today, to judge us harshly by. Even having a glass of wine with a meal before joining us can be offensive to us.
- Please don't bombard us with questions, especially about our culture. We realize that many of you have a genuine and sincere interest. Perhaps what many don't realize is that many of us are in the process of relearning about our culture ourselves and sometimes shame and embarrassment about the fact that we don't have all your answers can prevent us from participating further.
- Also, most people don't understand that our culture deems it impolite to ask someone a lot of questions. Specifically in the case of Residential School Survivors, it can be re-traumatizing as they were often interrogated and it was never possible to give the 'right' answer. Swift and severe punishments usually resulted from being asked a lot of direct questions. It has been my experience that when I take the time to really listen when someone is speaking, I find many answers in what they've said.

I understand that this can be a lot to take in and digest. In my years of working with this issue I have spent much time helping non natives deal with the conflicting emotions that can both surprise and unsettle people. That is a choice I intentionally and willingly make. Not all of us do so please, talk to each other and keep talking about it. The more often you discuss this with your family, friends, and co-workers, the more awareness gets generated and the more likely we will all benefit.

In the spirit of creating new beginnings for all our peoples -"All my relations".