



# So You Think You Know Indian Country



## INDIAN LAND

This resource is intended to create an awareness of representations of citizens of Native nations to provide allies and accomplices with information that will help shift the narrative of Indian Country away from harmful stereotypes to positive images, recognition, and appreciation.

### Introduction

Throughout the generations, Native nations have celebrated their diverse histories, cultures, traditions, and presence. However, since settler contact, Natives have been misrepresented, tokenized, and stereotyped in ways that reduce or take away their humanity and erase their diversity. As time went on harmful stereotypes and oppression of Native people became ingrained in popular culture from films and fashion to sports mascots and many more.

As a result, outsiders to Native communities began to generalize Native folks to one monolithic group of people, failing to recognize the unique cultures and backgrounds of Native nations. The truth is that Indian Country is made up of hundreds of Native nations who come from different regions, backgrounds, experiences, and communities that should be celebrated as their own. Negative representations of Native people do not depict the diversity of these communities correctly and oftentimes paint them as something they are not.

Despite these harmful and racist images being present, Native nations have persisted and joined together to eliminate stereotypes and myths about Indian Country. Citizens of Native nations are beginning to step into spaces that were not historically designed for them, and they are leading the way for generations to come. We see Natives in elected positions, such as Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland (Pueblo of Laguna) and Lieutenant Governor of Minnesota Peggy Flanagan (White Earth Band of Ojibwe). Natives are taking control of their stories by playing Native roles in media and film, as seen in *Reservation Dogs* and *Killers of the Flower Moon*. Citizens of Native nations are also everywhere in our everyday lives! They might be your neighbor, your barista at the local coffee shop, or on your favorite sports team. When we see Native folks creating spaces of positive recognition, representing Native nations correctly, and sharing their stories how they were meant to be shared, it benefits us all.

Through exploring common misconceptions about Native communities this guide hopes to empower everyone to take action to support Native nations. This resource is designed to dispel common misconceptions about Native communities, fostering a deeper understanding of the diversity of Indian Country. By promoting accurate representations, we can support Native nations in their efforts to preserve their truth, celebrate their cultures, and uphold their sovereignty.

## **What are the most common myths and stereotypes that Native folks face?**

Many harmful stereotypes continue to be perpetuated against Native nations, undermining their sovereignty and perpetuating misconceptions about their cultures, communities, and identities. These assumptions often discredit individuals' "Nativity," calling into question whether someone is "Native enough" based on stereotypical images of Native people and life. While we cannot address every myth in this resource, we aim to highlight some of the most common and damaging ones to shift the narrative toward positive, authentic representations of Native people.

- **Physical appearance:** Native folks are extremely diverse in their appearance. Historically, Native representations in film, media, mascots, etc., display images of Native people who have dark skin, dark hair, and other “Native-like” features. While many citizens of Native nations do possess some or all of these characteristics, many do not. Native nations understand that identity is not defined by appearance—being Native is about community, culture, and heritage, not skin color or hairstyle.
- **Geographical Location:** A persistent misconception is that all Native people live on reservations. But in reality, Native folks live everywhere—urban areas, rural communities, and even abroad. Whether living in a city, suburb, or on Tribal lands, Native people can maintain strong connections to their communities, cultures, and traditions. This diversity of location reflects the strength and adaptability of Native nations, whose citizens continue to navigate and thrive in various environments.
- **Casinos:** It is often assumed that every Native nation has a casino and that it has led to their community having an excess amount of funds. This is not true! While some Native nations do operate casinos this is not the case for all nations. The funds generated from casino revenue are often reinvested into essential community resources like housing, healthcare, education, scholarships, and more.
- **Free College Tuition:** A widespread myth is that all Native students can attend college in the United States free of cost. This is not the case! Some colleges and universities do have tuition waiver programs for Native students, while many do not. These programs come with specific requirements and often do not cover the full cost of attending college. Native nations may offer scholarships to their citizens, but access to these resources depends on the nation and its financial capacity. Many Native students still face significant financial barriers to higher education, just like other students.

## How can I identify positive vs. negative representations of Indian Country?

We see imagery and representations of Natives in lots of different spaces. Some in advertisements, media, and sports can be perceived as harmful while others are not. As a non-Native ally, it's important to be mindful of the impact these images have on Native communities. Some representations honor Native voices and celebrate their cultures, while others perpetuate stereotypes and cause harm. We have a few tips to help you navigate this distinction:

- **Just ask!** If you are debating whether or not something is appropriate, ask the communities or individuals it could affect. Reaching out directly shows respect for Native voices and nations. However, remember that the views of one Native individual might not be the same as another, and that's perfectly okay. Different Native nations, Tribes, and generations will hold varying opinions on representations, and that's ok! It's important to listen to a variety of voices to gain a deeper understanding of the issue at hand.
- **Do your research!** If you come across an image or representation that makes you question it, take some time to investigate its origins. Some representations may show inaccurate depictions of regalia, traditions, or cultural symbols. Using imagery out of context is harmful, as it distorts the culture and misrepresents the community being depicted.
  - Researching where and how things are used can help you understand if the representation is appropriate. Additionally, look for sources from Native communities themselves to get an accurate and respectful account of their cultural practices.
- **Consider the context,** and examine the context in which the representation is being used. Is it being used to educate and celebrate Native nations and communities, or is it used for commercial gain, entertainment, or mockery? Positive representations often come from within Native communities or with their consultation and celebrate the complexity of Native cultures. Negative representations tend to rely on stereotypes, reduce Native people to caricatures, or use things outside of their cultural context.

# What are the biggest challenges that Native nations are confronted with as a result of stereotypes?

When stereotypes are present in Indian Country it affects everyone in different ways. To further explain the impact of stereotypes we will discuss a few negative outcomes that are a result of harmful assumptions, myths, and generalizations of our communities.

## **Emotional Labor + Education**

When harmful comments or imagery are directed at them, Native folks often find themselves being the only Native person in the room, tasked with correcting misconceptions or educating others. This role of being the "teacher" or "spokesperson" and constant pressure to defend one's identity, culture, and history can be exhausting, leading to burnout and frustration.

## **Mental Health**

When people are misrepresented in politics, film, media, etc., it can diminish self-confidence and pride in culture. Native nations face alarming rates of suicide and poor mental health, and these stereotypes alongside negative imagery don't help. The mental health of a Native nation's citizens is a top priority for communities, which is why many leaders step up to defend their people against harmful misrepresentations.

## **Erasure**

Stereotypes not only misrepresent Native people, but they also erase the rich diversity that exists within Indian Country. Native nations have distinct languages, traditions, and cultural practices, and when they are lumped together under a single, generalized identity, their unique stories are lost.

Failing to acknowledge these distinctions diminishes the nation's accomplishments, history, and sovereignty. Similarly, stereotypes often paint Native nations as "people of the past," ignoring their continued presence and resilience today.

This historical erasure harms Native nations by perpetuating the myth that their cultures are static or extinct, when in reality, Native nations are dynamic, evolving, and thriving in the present.

### **Exclusion**

Stereotypes also affect political representation and advocacy. Misrepresentations in government and the media often lead to Native voices being excluded or dismissed from important conversations. When Native nations are portrayed in a stereotypical or reductive manner, it becomes easier for policymakers and the general public to ignore their contemporary struggles and needs. Harmful generalizations undermine sovereignty and complicate efforts to secure critical resources, policy changes, and rebuild Native nations.

### **Public Education**

Harmful stereotypes in educational materials and curricula continue to misinform the general public about Native nations, furthering misconceptions. When non-Native people are raised on inaccurate portrayals of Native history, they are more likely to perpetuate harmful myths as adults.

Textbooks may oversimplify the diverse cultures of Native nations or gloss over the brutal realities of colonization, presenting Native people in a dehumanizing or patronizing way. These misrepresentations foster ignorance, leading to a lack of understanding and empathy toward the contemporary challenges Native nations face.

## **How can I use my voice as an ally to help shift the narrative?**

As an ally to Native nations, you play a vital role in shifting the narrative away from harmful stereotypes and toward one that celebrates the diversity, sovereignty, and resilience of Native people. Here are some practical ways to use your voice to support positive change:

- **Speak Up:** Whether it's in conversation, on social media, or in the workplace, don't be afraid to call out inappropriate language, imagery, or actions. Addressing these issues in the moment can help educate others and prevent the spread of damaging narratives. You can correct misinformation by sharing facts and resources that amplify Native voices and perspectives.
- **Advocate for Change:** If your school, workplace, or community is using offensive imagery or language (such as mascots that depict Native people in a derogatory way), take a stand. Start petitions, write letters, or engage in conversations with decision-makers to encourage the removal of these harmful symbols and the use of these stereotypes in public spaces, media, and institutions.
- **Be Mindful of Language:** Language shapes perception, and outdated or offensive terms can perpetuate stereotypes. Use the preferred terminology of Native nations, and when in doubt, ask how they wish to be identified. Avoid referring to Native nations in the past tense, which erases their contemporary presence and contributions.
- **Use Native-Authored Resources:** When seeking out information or teaching materials about Native nations, prioritize resources written or created by Native people, nations, and organizations. These materials are more likely to offer accurate and nuanced representations of Native cultures and histories.
- **Elevate Native Voices:** On social media and other platforms, share content created by Native activists, scholars, and artists. By centering Native voices in conversations about representation, land rights, and sovereignty, you help uplift the perspectives that matter most.
- **Engage in Ongoing Learning:** Shifting the narrative around Native nations requires continuous learning. Keep listening to Native voices and remain open to learning. Understanding the challenges, triumphs, and nuances of Native experiences takes time, but it is key to being a strong ally or accomplice. When Native people share their stories or insights, whether in public forums, social media, or personal conversations, pay attention and support their perspectives.

For true reconciliation to occur, Native nations must be fully recognized and respected for their diversity, resilience, and sovereignty.

Harmful stereotypes make this process more difficult by distorting Native identities and histories. When the general public continues to believe in myths and assumptions about Native nations, it stalls progress toward healing the historical trauma caused by colonization, forced removal, and cultural genocide. Positive narrative change is essential to fostering respectful relationships between Native and non-Native communities, ensuring that Native nations' sovereignty and rights are upheld.

## How can citizens of Native nations join the effort to shift the narrative?

Native folks are emerging as leaders for change in the fight against prejudice, appropriation, and stereotypes towards Native nations. While some are taking roles as Natives in film, political office, or activists, others are taking on roles that are less in the spotlight but nonetheless just as important.

For example, we see Native students in higher education speaking out against misinformation in the classroom. Others may be calling out harmful images on social media and educating their network on appropriation and stereotypes. No matter the role, shifting the narrative is happening within Native communities across the nation and world.

Are you a citizen of a Native nation wondering how you can join the effort to shift the narrative? Every role in this movement matters, here are some ways to get involved:

- **Create Spaces:** While positive representations of Native people have started to grow, there is always room for more. Consider how you can use your unique talents, interests, and knowledge to contribute to this movement.



- Whether you're an artist, educator, entrepreneur, or community leader, there are many ways to amplify Native voices and contribute to the positive shift.
- **Educate Others:** If you have the emotional capacity and desire, sharing your knowledge and lived experiences with others outside your community can have a lasting impact. By helping to dispel myths and misinformation, you create opportunities for non-Native people to learn and better understand Native sovereignty, culture, and identity.
- **Advocate:** Getting involved in advocacy efforts is a powerful way to make lasting change. Whether you're advocating for issues important to your own nation or supporting other Native nations, your involvement strengthens the collective movement for Native sovereignty and representation.
- **Celebrate Culture:** One of the most powerful ways to combat stereotypes and shift the narrative is to celebrate your culture proudly and unapologetically. Maybe you can learn more about your language, traditions, or history. Or maybe you have that knowledge and can share it with other community members looking to learn.

## Additional Resources

- [NGC resources](#)
- Instagram @whennativesvote
- “Native Enough” by Nina O’Leary
- “Everything You Wanted to Know about Indians but Were Afraid to Ask” by Anton Treuer
- [IllumiNative Guide](#)

