

ABORIGINAL PROTOCOLS: WELCOME TO COUNTRY & ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

ACKNOWLEDGING THE FIRST LANDCARERS

[Source: Reconciliation Australia]

WHAT IS A WELCOME TO COUNTRY?

A Welcome to Country is a ceremony performed by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Elders, or Traditional Owners who have been given permission, to welcome visitors onto their traditional land.

Protocols for welcoming visitors to Country have been part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures for thousands of years. Traditionally, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups had clear boundaries separating their Country from that of other groups.

Crossing into another group's Country required a request for permission to enter. When permission was granted, the hosting group would welcome the visitors, offering them safe passage and protection of their spiritual being during the journey. While visitors were provided with a safe passage, they also had to respect the protocols and rules of the land owner group while on their Country.

Today, these protocols have been adapted to fit with contemporary life. However, the essential elements of welcoming visitors and offering safe passage remain in place. A Welcome to Country occurs at the beginning of a formal event, and can take many forms, including singing, dancing, smoking ceremonies, or a speech in traditional language and/or English.

WHAT IS AN ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY?

An Acknowledgement of Country is an opportunity for anyone to show respect for Australia's Traditional Owners, and the continuing connection that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have to the land, sea, sky and waterways.

An Acknowledgement of Country can be performed by an Aboriginal or

non-Aboriginal person, and is generally offered at the beginning of a meeting, speech or formal occasion. For Landcare related activities, it could also be offered at the commencement of an 'on-ground' activity, perhaps considered alongside any Work, Health & Safety (WHS) briefing, or 'tool-box' talk, for example.

There are no set protocols or phrasing for an Acknowledgement of Country. The key aspect is that it is delivered in a genuine and heartfelt way.

Below are two examples:

General: I begin by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet today, and pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

Specific: I begin by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet today, the [Traditional Owners] of the [nation], and pay my respects to Elders past and present.

Note: If you are unsure of specific details, it is recommended that you use a general version, unless you are able to confirm the appropriate terms from a qualified local source.

WHY ARE WELCOME TO COUNTRY AND ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF COUNTRY IMPORTANT?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have experienced a long history of exclusion from Australian history books, the Australian flag, the Australian anthem, and for many years, Australian democracy.

This history of dispossession and colonisation lies at the heart of the disparity between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians today. Including recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in events, meetings, and national symbols, is one part of ending the exclusion that has been so



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damaging.

Incorporating welcoming and acknowledgement protocols into official meetings and events recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Australians, and the Traditional Custodians of the land. It promotes an ongoing connection to place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, and shows respect for Traditional Owners.

WHAT IS THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN 'country' AND 'Country'?

In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, the meaning of Country is more than just ownership or connection to land, as Professor Mick Dodson explains:

“When we talk about traditional ‘Country’...we mean something beyond the dictionary definition of the word. For Aboriginal Australians...we might mean homeland, or tribal or clan area, and we might mean more than just a place on the map.

For us, Country is a word for all the values, places, resources, stories and cultural obligations associated with that area... It describes the entirety of our ancestral domains.

While they may all no longer necessarily be the title-holders to land, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are still connected to the Country of their ancestors and most consider themselves the custodians or caretakers of their land.”

HOW CAN I ORGANISE A WELCOME TO COUNTRY?

Firstly, it is important to note that a Welcome to Country by a local Aboriginal Elder and/or Traditional Owner will usually attract a fee that is specified by the individual or organisation conducting the Welcome.

It is commonplace for dignitaries and representatives from all areas of Australian society to receive remuneration for their time, expertise, experience and credentials when asked to speak publicly – Aboriginal Elders are no different.

If you are not sure who to contact for a Welcome to Country in your local area, or just want more information, contact the Landcare NSW Community Landcare Aboriginal Engagement Officer or your region’s Local Land Services (LLS) Aboriginal Officer.

DISCLAIMER: The information contained in this publication is based on knowledge and understanding at the time of publication. However, because of advances in knowledge, users are reminded of the need to ensure that information upon which they rely is up to date and to check currency of the information with the user’s independent advisor.



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