



# Protocols

for Welcomes to Country  
and Acknowledging Country

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ISSUE NO.1



*Smoking gum leaves. Photograph by Danièle Hromek*



A Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country are important cultural protocols that occur when people are coming together to meet. They are based on traditions that originates from a time before non-Indigenous people reached the shores of the continent now called Australia. When travelling through Country it was customary to stop at the boundary to wait for the custodians of that land to be properly welcomed, informed, and smoked prior to proceeding. These traditions have been adapted into what we now know as a Welcome to Country, an Acknowledgement of Country, and a Smoking Ceremony.

*A Welcome to Country and an Acknowledgement of Country are not the same thing. Outlined below are recommended processes for ensuring these protocols are appropriately considered.*



A Welcome to Country is a ceremony performed by a Traditional Custodian<sup>1</sup> of the land upon which the event is occurring. A Welcome to Country is culturally significant, they date to times prior to colonisation, are part of showing respect and adhering to cultural protocols. A Welcome to Country should be observed mindfully.

1— Traditional Owners, Traditional Custodians, Aboriginal Owners, Recognised Aboriginal Parties, etc all have different meanings and legal implications, and these may vary by state. It is important to ask each individual how they identify, both in relation to their cultural group/s and legally. This document references Traditional Custodians however all ways of identifying are respectfully recognised.

## When

A Welcome to Country should be the first agenda item at significant, public, or official events, as well as at awards and conferences—in particular where prominent guests may be in attendance or where a large proportion of the Institute’s membership may be present.

## Who

Only the Traditional Custodians of the land upon which the event is taking place is in a position of Cultural Authority to be able to deliver a Welcome to Country.

It is important to be aware in many parts of the continent there are disputes between groups about who are the Traditional Custodians of that place, that multiple groups may identify as being Traditional Custodians, and there may be a need to include more than one representative group. Any interactions between individuals from different groups needs to be carefully considered and managed.

If a Traditional Custodian is not available to perform a Welcome to Country and another First Nations person is asked to perform an Acknowledgement of Country instead, they should be treated with respect, be made to feel welcome at the event, and given some recompense if available (preferably payment, but as a minimum, a ticket to the event).

If a First Nations person is attending an event, it is respectful to ask the First Nations person’s preference about whether they would like to do a Welcome to Country or Acknowledgement of Country or if they prefer someone else do it.

## What

Preparation is required for a Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country. A Welcome to Country invokes the Ancestors and spirits of Country, and for many it is a spiritual and meaningful event which should not be depreciated. As such, organisers should not put First Nations people on the spot in relation to performing a Welcome to Country or Acknowledgement of Country—a Welcome to Country or Acknowledgement of Country must be organised in advance.

### Recommendations for Organising a Welcome to Country

- Speak with more than one local First Nations organisation who can advise about the nature of the local communities. This should happen prior to any one person or group being engaged.
- Leave ample time in advance of an event or publication to ensure any disputes are understood in order arrangements can be made to be inclusive of all perspectives.
- Take time to understand how each individual identifies. Learn how to say people's names and group names properly in advance.
- Ensure names are spelled correctly. Follow the advice of local First Nations organisations regarding group names. Follow an individual person's spelling preferences if referring to a person's heritage.
- Pay a fee for Traditional Custodians to perform a Welcome to Country. Agree the fee in advance.
- Ensure those who are performing a Welcome to Country are well looked after from door to door. For instance, organise car-parking or taxi vouchers, consider access requirements, ensure they have food and beverages, consider how to host them in a cultural way, care for their wellbeing and comfort.
- Contact First Nations meeting attendees in advance to give them the opportunity to provide advice or feedback should they wish.

*Weaving and photograph by Danièle Hromek*



An Acknowledgement of Country is a way in which anybody (other than the Traditional Custodians of the Country) can show respect for the Traditional Custodians of a place, their culture and heritage, and continuing connections to Country.

**When** An Acknowledgement of Country should be genuine and may be performed at all events such as meetings or internal events. An Acknowledgement of Country should occur at the beginning of the event.

**Who** An Acknowledgement of Country can be made by anyone regardless of whether they are First Nations or non-Indigenous. If an Elder is not available, it is culturally acceptable for somebody else to perform an Acknowledgement. Usually, the most senior person in the room would be the most appropriate.

**What** There are two options for Acknowledgements of Country dependent on the circumstances:

### SPECIFIC

This should be used where it has been identified there are no disputes between groups and the name/s of the groups on whose land you are gathered is/are known.

While it is always recommended a personalised Acknowledgement of Country is delivered, some general words that might be used are:

“ I acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we meet today and pay my respects to their Elders past and present. I recognise their continuing care of Country and connections to land, sea and community. I extend that respect to First Nations peoples here today.

### NON-SPECIFIC

This should be used if the name/s of the Traditional Custodians on whose land you are gathered is not known, or if there are disputes in which multiple groups identify as being Traditional Custodians. While it is always recommended a personalised Acknowledgement of Country is delivered, some general words that might be used are:

“ I acknowledge the <insert name of group/s here> people, Traditional Custodians of the land on which we meet today. I pay my respects to their Elders past and present. I recognise their continuing care of Country and connections to land, sea and community. I extend that respect to First Nations peoples here today.



### Personalisation of Acknowledgement of Country

It is preferable that whoever is doing an Acknowledgement of Country ensures it is personal, contextual, and meaningful, recognising their own relationships and understandings of Country in the Acknowledgement of Country.

To add personal context or purpose to an Acknowledgement of Country, the speaker may choose to include a declaration of their purpose or intent on Country or add a short personal anecdote relating to their relationship with Country or community. Some examples include:

“ As an architect/designer who builds on, in and with Country, I recognise those custodians who have always built/designed on, in and with Country.

I come to this part of Country to deliver a talk about <insert topic> and note that this part of Country has <insert attributes related to talk>. I am grateful to those who have ensured the health and wellbeing of Country so I can come here to deliver this talk.

I am grateful to Country and those who care for Country for the land I walk on, the waters I drink, the food I eat, the shelters made from Country. I could not be here to do this work without them.

### SOME ADDITIONAL NOTES TO CONSIDER AND UNDERSTAND:

“ I acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded.

And/or:

I acknowledge that Country was never ceded.

This relates to the fact that as the continent now called Australia was taken by force rather than agreement, we have two competing claims to sovereignty by right of heredity over this continent: the Crown and First Nations peoples. While it is more complex than this, recognising that sovereignty or Country were not ceded is an acknowledgement of the rights of First Nations peoples to Country and/or to be sovereign peoples.

“ I acknowledge emerging Elders.

The term “emerging Elders” was introduced to Acknowledgements more recently and many find the inclusion troublesome as it undermines community processes in which Elders are chosen and the important role Eldership plays in communities. Eldership is not assumed, it cannot be self-appointed, rather it is conferred by the community who recognises the role played in a community by an individual. The inclusion of the term “emerging Elder” is perceived by some to circumvent community processes of choosing Elders to create convenient community people who may or may not be emerging into Eldership as chosen by the community. It is not recommended the Institute recognise “emerging Elders” due to this sensitivity.



Artwork by Uncle Greg Simms.

## Acknowledging Country in Writing

When Acknowledging Country in writing such as articles or websites it is important to be aware in many parts of the continent there are disputes between groups about who are the Traditional Custodians, that multiple groups may identify as being Traditional Custodians, and more than one group may need to be acknowledged in the writing.

Contact more than one local First Nations organisation who can advise about the nature of the local communities and the appropriate Country to acknowledge.

## Who to Ask for Advice

- Regional Network, National Indigenous Australians Agency
- Traditional Custodian or Traditional Owner groups in your local area
- Elders' groups from your local area
- Local Native Title Holders and Applicants
- Recognised Aboriginal Parties (RAPs) in your local area
- Local Registered Indigenous Corporations and Aboriginal Corporations
- Descendants' groups in your local area
- Local Aboriginal Land Councils
- First Nations peoples working in the Local Council
- First Nations Local/Community/Shire Councils (if relevant to that state)



