

# Reclaiming Native Truth



*A PROJECT TO DISPEL AMERICA'S MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS*

## **CHANGING THE NARRATIVE ABOUT NATIVE AMERICANS**

**A GUIDE FOR NATIVE PEOPLES AND ORGANIZATIONS**



# Visibility and Truth

**Too many people in the United States hold a false story about Native Americans in their hearts and minds.** This story makes us invisible or reduces us to stereotypes. This story is not ours, not created or told by us, not our reality. Created mostly by non-Native people, sometimes it comes from ignorance; other times it comes from racism and oppression.

**Invisibility and myths harm our children, our peoples and our nations.** They deny our humanity. And they keep the larger society from benefiting from our wisdom, perspectives and leadership to find solutions to our country's most critical issues.

## It is time for a new story. Our story.

**This guide is filled with information from the largest research study ever done** in Indian Country about the current story and ways to change it. We used what we learned to create a new story — one we have always known is true — and then proved through national testing that it works. It changes people's understanding of Native Americans and increases support for our issues.

**This new story must become the dominant story in the United States.** Replacing the old story will take all of us, working together across Native nations, with all Native peoples and with our allies. It is an opportunity to build on many past and current efforts to tell our authentic stories, including the recent power of Standing Rock, seizing and continuing this moment for Native voices to hold the spotlight and the microphone.

**This is the moment to write and tell our story** — for our children, our peoples, our cultures, our lands, our truth.

## What Are Narrative and Narrative Change?

**Narrative** is the broadly accepted story that reinforces ideas, norms, issues and expectations in society. It is created by stories passed along between family and friends, by the news media, by entertainment and pop culture, by education and public art, and by policies and much more. It often reinforces stereotypes and the status quo and allows oppressive systems and norms to stay in place.

**Dominant narrative** is the lens through which history is told from the perspective of the dominant culture.

**Narrative change** is an intentional effort to replace an existing narrative with something new. It is a powerful contributor to social change. Narrative change can lead to shifts in attitudes, behaviors, practices and policies — and can lead to deeper and lasting changes in systems and cultures.



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**STRONG  
RESILIENT  
INDIGENOUS**

# Changing the Narrative About Native Americans

As human beings, we are storytellers. We explore and make sense of the world by telling stories. We form and deepen relationships by telling stories. We understand how the world looks to other people by listening to stories.

So when the stories people hear and repeat about Native Americans are filled with negative stereotypes, misperceptions, myths and the sense that we are invisible or gone, people make an assumption that this is “the way things are.” This becomes the “dominant narrative,” or the accepted story, about Native peoples in the United States.

Reinforced by popular culture, the arts, entertainment, schools, sports, companies, news media and so many other channels, this negative narrative is one that most people have heard since birth. It hinders our work, our ability to live the lives we want and our access to opportunities. It colors our daily interactions with doctors, service providers, teachers and administrators in our children’s schools, and many others. It leads to harmful interactions for our children that result in bullying, isolation and trauma.

Among non-Native Americans, it fuels individual people’s biases and racism. The United States, as a nation, has used this false and harmful narrative to justify the creation of laws and historic policies that stripped our nations of their inherent right to protect their citizens and their lands.

Changing this dominant narrative about Native Americans is the key to advancing tribal sovereignty and our basic rights, dismantling invisibility and racism, and ensuring a better present and future for Native nations and for Native children and families. The time is now for Native peoples to come together to change this narrative to one built on truth, strength and complexity.

**The time is now to show society that we are here, that we have always been here, and that we are important and vital contributors to our families and our tribes, and to the fabric of our local economies, arts, culture, politics and society at large.**

**The time is now for Native peoples to come together to change this narrative to one built on truth, strength and complexity.**

Working together, we will tell a new story, challenge assumptions that have been accepted and normalized over time, and reclaim the narrative.

Recognizing that research is one of many tools that can be used to improve the health and well-being of Native peoples, a group of diverse Native and non-Native experts from across the country worked together to develop a research strategy to guide this narrative change initiative. This two-year initiative, called *Reclaiming Native Truth*, has been the largest investment of its kind in Indian Country, with more than 180 people contributing to this work. In addition, 20,000 people participated in public opinion research, and we raised supporting funds from a range of organizations, including respected Native allies, major national funders, tribes and individual donors.

**For the first time, we have validation of what we have always known, and tools we can use in our lives and work, including:**

- **Data about the toxic combination of invisibility and pervasive negative stereotypes. We can see how it negatively influences the general public as well as policymakers, the judicial system, K–12 education, pop culture and entertainment, the arts, policy, media and philanthropy.**
- **A path forward to change the narrative, based on insights about the elements of our story that resonate most strongly with people.**
- **Proof that hearing this new narrative makes people much more likely to support Native Americans and Native issues.**
- **Information about which new allies are ready to learn more about accurate Native history, Native voices, and the visibility of Native contributions. We also have insights about how to work with these new allies to shift the narrative about Native Americans and to advance our shared goals of equity and social justice.**
- **Tools and message strategies that can work across the country, in different settings and with many different people.**
- **A way forward for Native peoples to come together — inspired by Standing Rock — toward a common goal.**

As the two-year *Reclaiming Native Truth* initiative comes to an end, a new effort is emerging. We call it a “movement of movements,” meaning that it recognizes, respects and links the existing Native-led work and efforts around a new, shared narrative. It also recognizes the contributions of our non-Native allies. Working together, we will tell a new story, challenge assumptions that have been accepted and normalized over time, and reclaim the narrative.





Allison Hollis, Osage  
Photograph by Thomas Ryan RedCorn

# Understanding the Current, Dominant Narrative About Native Americans

We can shift the dominant narrative only if we fully understand what it is, the values behind it, who created and controls it, and its consequences. That's why this work began with a two-year exploration, led by a group of Native leaders and non-Native allies, to understand the existing narrative.

As the result of our research, we now know what different groups of Americans — across socioeconomic, racial, geographic, gender and generational cohorts — think (and don't know) about Native Americans and Native issues. Some of the most commonly held, damaging and not-new myths are that individual Native Americans are not U.S. citizens, receive money from the government and don't pay taxes. Other myths are that all Native peoples are rich from casinos and go to college for free.

We now have documented evidence of how those biases are holding Native Americans back from political, economic and social equity as well as respectful representation.

“Positive” stereotypes blend many unique tribes into one “Native American” persona that is perceived to be committed to family and culture, spiritual and mystical, resilient through historical challenges, fiercely protective of the land, and patriotic to the United States. Non-Natives often hold positive and negative stereotypes at the same time: Native peoples living in poverty *and* rich from casinos; resilient *and* addicted to drugs and alcohol; the noble warrior *and* savage warrior.

We have known for some time how these misperceptions and biases keep contemporary Native Americans invisible or tied to the past. We now have documented evidence of how those biases are holding Native Americans back from political, economic and social equity as well as respectful representation. The research begins to shed light on how deeply these root causes of misunderstandings, misperceptions, disrespect, racism and dehumanization are embedded across society.

The current narrative has deep roots, created over hundreds of years, often purposely to oppress Native nations, peoples and cultures. Movies, TV shows and other popular culture reinforce it by using negative stereotypes or romanticizing our histories and peoples. Sports teams and advertisers reinforce it with racist mascots. Schools reinforce it by teaching biased and false history. News media reinforce it by reporting only on deficits.

It is not our story, but sometimes even Native organizations and leaders fall into the habit of using it. As we work to build support for funding, policies and programs, we sometimes play up needs and injustices, accidentally reinforcing negative stereotypes about poverty and social problems.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It is still necessary to point out inequities and challenges facing Native peoples, unjust laws and practices, and historic and continued discrimination and oppression. But those facts cannot stand alone; they must be placed in context with assets and strengths in order not to reinforce a deficit narrative — one that focuses only on challenges or weaknesses and not on strengths, resiliency and opportunity. See the messaging narratives on pages 18-21 for examples of how this works.





Angela Furgeson, *Mohawk*  
Photograph by Thomas Ryan RedCorn

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“For years, the lives and experiences of Indigenous peoples have often been introduced or described from a negative perspective. This may be well-intentioned because the narrative draws attention to the many challenges and incredible needs faced by Native peoples, but this narrative reinforces stereotypes and implies hopelessness. Native peoples are deeply hopeful and have an abundance of cultural knowledge that is positive. A better narrative is one that reclaims the truth of our positive values and relationships.”

– Cheryl Crazy Bull (*Sicangu Lakota*) President and CEO,  
American Indian College Fund

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We know too well how damaging all of this is to our peoples and especially our children. Most Americans fail to recognize we are distinct and sovereign Native nations with complex histories of governments and diplomatic relations that pre-date the existence of the United States. They fail to see us as individual human beings with deeply-held values who participate and contribute fully in contemporary society.

(For more information on this research, please see the *Reclaiming Native Truth* Research Report at [reclaimingnativetruth.com](http://reclaimingnativetruth.com).)



“We now have the knowledge and the tools. But we can only shift the narrative if we commit to reciprocity, in gratitude, to working together across Indian Country to advance change that bolsters our individual tribal identities while strengthening us collectively.”

Judith LeBlanc (*Caddo Nation of Oklahoma*),  
Director, The Native Organizers Alliance

## Reciprocity: Working Together to Shift the Narrative

We also learned how to build a new narrative that effectively shifts public perception. We worked together to create that narrative; we have tested it and share it in this guide.

When we all apply this narrative — through our unique voices, stories and channels to communicate about our own issues, priorities and missions — we create collective power.

We are also inviting allies to join this movement and use a version of the narrative to communicate more effectively, collaborate and invest in deeper relationships. It is vital that we work together with our non-Native allies to secure the change we seek. (For more about working with allies, see page 32.)

Over time, the new narrative will be amplified across many different voices and channels until it seems that “this story is everywhere.” Ultimately the dominant narrative, story and expectations shift, and action follows. Hearts and minds move, stereotypes fall, and positive pressure increases on the “levers” that will lead to lasting changes in behaviors and decisions — in education, popular culture and the arts, media, philanthropy and policymaking.

We saw the power of reciprocity and a shared narrative at Standing Rock. We witnessed the enormous attention, pressure and support that emerged around the world. We saw the power in standing behind our shared values of water, the land and our sovereignty to amplify the voices of hundreds of tribes and thousands of our young people. (See page 23 for more on Standing Rock.)

Let’s take all that we and the generations before us have experienced and learned, build on this wisdom, and together disrupt the old narrative and reclaim a new one. Let’s use the collective strength of a common narrative to increase the power of our tribal nations, organizations and peoples so that we collectively author and powerfully lead a more equitable reality where we fully benefit from and contribute to both Native communities and U.S. society overall.

Over time, the new narrative will be amplified across many different voices and channels until it seems that “this story is everywhere.”



# Our Shared Opportunity



By Suzan Shown Harjo  
(Cheyenne and Hodulgee  
Muscogee)

**LONG-TIME ACTIVIST,  
POET, WRITER, LECTURER,  
CURATOR AND POLICY  
ADVOCATE**

## Replacing False Narratives with the Truth

Narrative change is necessary today! Without it, we remain erased, invisible, out of sight, mind and heart. With it, we gain visibility, contemporary understanding, greater voice and respect.

We stand 5 million strong today, a reality that needs to be reflected in the national narrative. The current narrative, which has erased Native Nations and Citizens from the dominant American narrative, perpetuates the legal framework that allows our sacred places to be desecrated and will not allow us to protect them or even pray there. It sends a signal to grave robbers, defacers of ancient messages, miners and drillers that what they do is not horrifying, destructive and scarring, but that it's somehow normal and okay.

We are citizens of hundreds of sovereign Native Nations. This must become the narrative, replacing the erasure of Native Peoples which lets the U.S. Supreme Court stop our Nations from carrying out their inherent sovereign duties to protect families from violence by anyone, even non-Natives. The current narrative results in freedom for the majority of those who rape, murder and torture tribal citizens. It is the reason our women and children face the highest rates of violence in the U.S. today.

We carry cultural wisdom and professional expertise into every sector of society, both in our tribes and in American communities. We are artists, history makers and storytellers, adept at sharing our past and our current reality. This must become the narrative, replacing the erasure that obscures our true identities and sanctions their replacement with false personae. The deceptive portrayals of our Nations as unfair and unjust — or as generating poor parenting, unworthy grandparenting and unnurtured children — lead many to think our babies would be better off in non-Native settings. This has played out in tragic legal wrangling, exposing an intense anti-Native sentiment that some segments of society did not attempt to conceal, as well as a shocking ignorance and anti-Native bias among some jurists.

Our young people are strong, proud and resilient. We — and thousands of others — stood with them as they took the lead at Standing Rock. They are reclaiming their cultures and histories on social media, on the stage and in film, and other places of creative expression and leadership. Their voices must spread beyond Indian Country. This must become the narrative, replacing the insidious erasure, which tells our children that they are less than human, and are cartoons, mascots or slurs on a uniform or helmet.

Every harm perpetuated against Native Peoples has been made possible through purposeful erasure, most of which has been carried out by the powerful in governments, educational institutions and the advertising and sports worlds. Even when bad acts are done by individuals, responsible authorities look the other way, often blaming those who are injured for daring to respond to the injury.

We all are trying to do what we can to address the multiplicity of emergencies all around us. If we can come together to create narrative change, we can end the foundational corrosion of erasure and its overlayer of false identities, and we will begin to resolve many of the problems we are grappling with in our smaller circles. We cannot do everything, but this is something we can do — change the narrative, and use that to drive systemic, lasting, transformational change.

If we work to restore the narrative that has been erased, we will succeed in generating understanding about laws and policies that continue to devastate our Native world. That will lead to real change. The dominant American narrative dehumanizes, derides and objectifies us. The new narrative tells the truth, the strength of our history, the power of our contemporary attainments, the resilience of our cultures, the continuance of our values. Until we reclaim the narrative about ourselves, our distinctiveness, our diversity, our sovereignty and our nationhood, we will continue to be caught in an erasure quagmire that was designed to secure our extinction. Reclaiming the narrative will be hard work, but it will work, if we do it together.





# Building a New Narrative That Works

Grounded in the research from *Reclaiming Native Truth*, we worked with Native storytellers, artists and advocates from across the country to create a new narrative.

*We tested this narrative in a nationally representative survey and found that support among people who read the narrative increased significantly. Their support was also higher than that of people who answered similar questions a year ago.*

This section includes:

- ◆ The framework: how the narrative is built around four themes that must be present in every communication in order to shift the overall narrative
- ◆ Language for the new narrative, which may be used directly or may be adapted by people and organizations to address specific issues
- ◆ Testing results proving that the narrative works



Many thanks to our narrative change advisors, shown here at the gathering to work on the new narrative. For a full list of participants, please see page 40.

## The Four Themes That Make the Narrative Strong

The research done by *Reclaiming Native Truth* revealed four key themes that need to be part of the new narrative because, used together, they move hearts and minds:



### VALUES

Native values of family, connection to the land, and respect for culture and tradition are understood and highly respected by non-Native Americans. Linking to these values creates a connection and builds understanding. Illustrating how these values are present today helps prevent a slip into historic, romanticized ideas of Native cultures.



### HISTORY

Research shows that most non-Native people do not fully understand the true histories of Native Americans and nations, are open to learning, and feel frustrated when they realize that what they were taught in school was false or incomplete. Weaving in facts — not too many, but a few to get the conversation started — about Native Americans' histories makes people more receptive to hearing more and more willing to act on many issues of importance to Native Americans.



### VISIBILITY

History must be directly linked to contemporary life. This shows two things: 1) that Native Americans' cultures and contributions are vital parts of modern life, and 2) that injustices continue today. Because many non-Native Americans don't know (or don't realize they know) any Native Americans, highlighting Native peoples' involvement in every aspect of modern life helps people to move past the systemic erasure and stereotypes and to see what is true today.



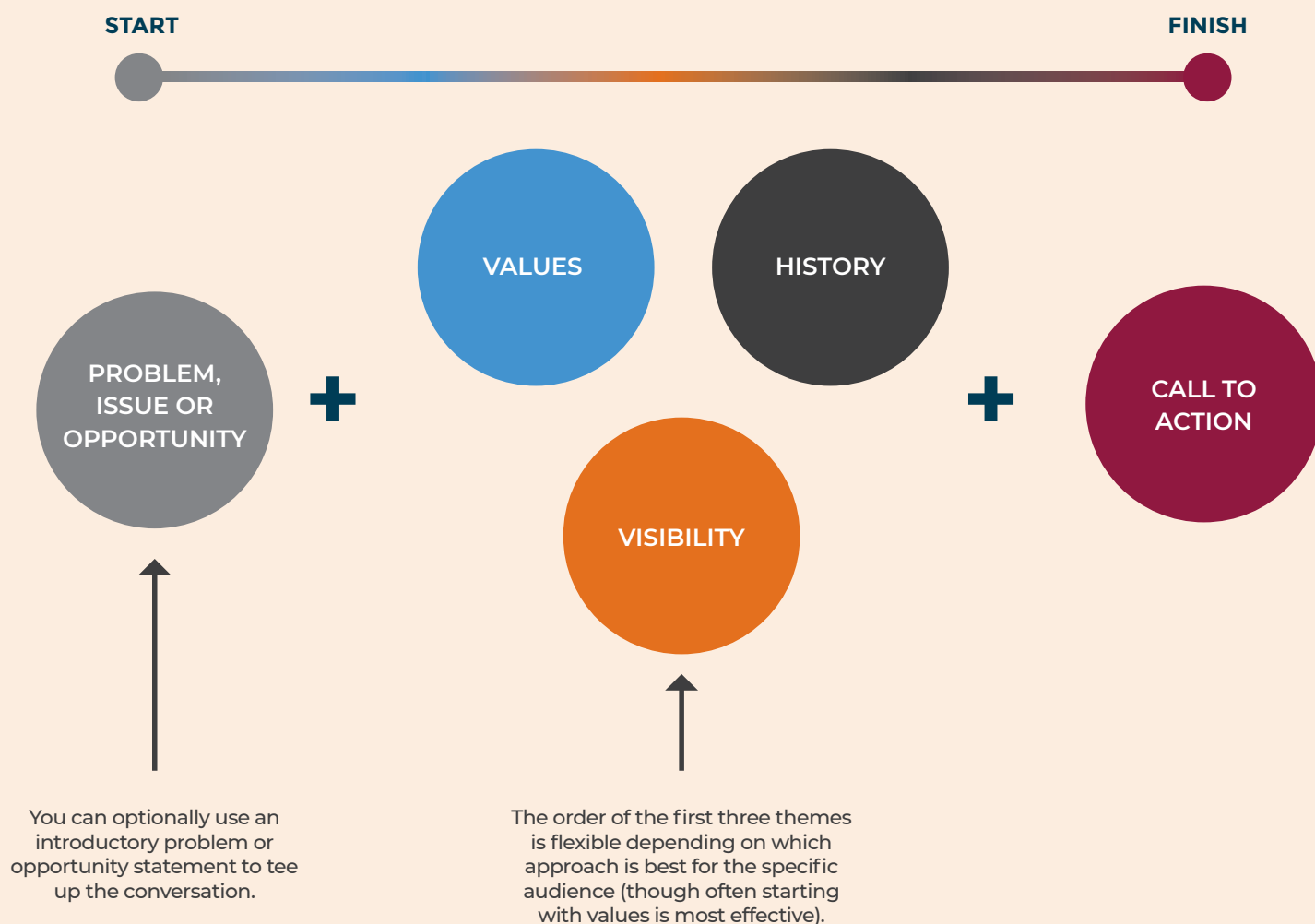
### CALL TO ACTION

The other essential piece of the narrative is a strong call to action or request for people to do something. It will vary depending on the audience and the issue, but it should be clear, specific and inviting. See the issue-specific narratives on page 18–21 for some examples.

## Narrative Framework

The narrative framework illustrated below is the “recipe” for all communication intended to advance the new narrative. It is highly flexible, enabling Native peoples and allies to incorporate and customize specific messages, facts and stories into the overall recipe.

You can communicate about your issues, histories, stories and opportunities in your unique way — while at the same time echoing, modeling and reinforcing a common, overarching narrative. The key is to use all four themes. On occasion you will be in situations where you need to set additional context by including a problem statement to lead into your narrative.







When you use this framework, you amplify the points that were tested and proven to be most influential in motivating people to support Native peoples and issues.








## The Heart of the Story

The paragraph below summarizes the main narrative that will take hold through this work. You may choose to use the exact language in this narrative; however, it is more likely that you will use it as a guide or an inspiration to shape your own communication. As we advance the intention of this new narrative together, it will become the new dominant idea that people in the United States hold in their hearts and minds, shaping their attitudes, behaviors and decisions about Native American peoples and issues.

To illustrate where the four themes appear in this narrative, we marked:

-  **Values** in blue
-  **History** in charcoal
-  **Visibility** in orange
-  **Call to action** in red

This narrative paragraph is taken from a longer overarching narrative statement. The longer version, which is included in the appendix, can provide ideas and inspiration as you write your own narrative-based messages and communication.

-  The history of Native Americans is one of great strength and revitalization.
-  It is a story built around values that have shaped Native cultures and U.S. society: respect for family and elders; shared responsibility to care for the land; and an obligation to do right by the next generation.
-  It is a story of resilience through great pain and injustice, from broken treaties and loss of land and language in the past to
-  derogatory sports mascots and biased history taught in schools today. Across more than 600 sovereign Native nations<sup>2</sup> and in every profession and segment of society, Native Americans carry the cultural knowledge and wisdom that sustains Native nations and helps build a stronger future for all.
-  Let's find our commonalities, celebrate our differences and creatively work together for our shared future and the futures of the next generations.

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<sup>2</sup> As of this writing, there are 573 federally recognized tribes and many state-recognized tribes, as well as many other sovereign Native nations.

## People Across the United States Are Ready for This New Narrative

We tested the new narrative in a nationally representative online survey of 2,000 U.S. adults across the country. Half of the people in the survey read the narrative; the other half did not. Both groups answered the same questions about their level of interest in Native American issues, their perception of the amount of discrimination Native Americans face today and their support for key Native issues.

This new narrative — built on values, history, visibility and a call to action — increases people's support of the overall narrative and of several issues that are important to Native Americans. Consider these findings from the survey:

Diverse Native professionals, artists, community leaders and leaders of major Native American organizations also reviewed the narrative for accuracy, usability and effectiveness.

### 81% agreed

81 percent of people agreed with the narrative statement, and only 5 percent disagreed (the remaining 14 percent were neutral).

### $\frac{2}{3}$ will share

Two-thirds said they are willing to share this statement with others.

### Works with all

The narrative works with people in all parts of the country — all genders, all age groups, and both Republican and Democratic voters.

### 55% believe

At the beginning of the survey, 34 percent of respondents said they believed that Native Americans face a great deal or a lot of discrimination. After we introduced the narrative, that number jumped to 55 percent.

# Issue-Specific Narratives

Native American advocates used the four-themed model to create the following messages about specific issues. When these issues are communicated in this way, not only are they more effective on their own, but they also contribute to the overall shift in narrative.

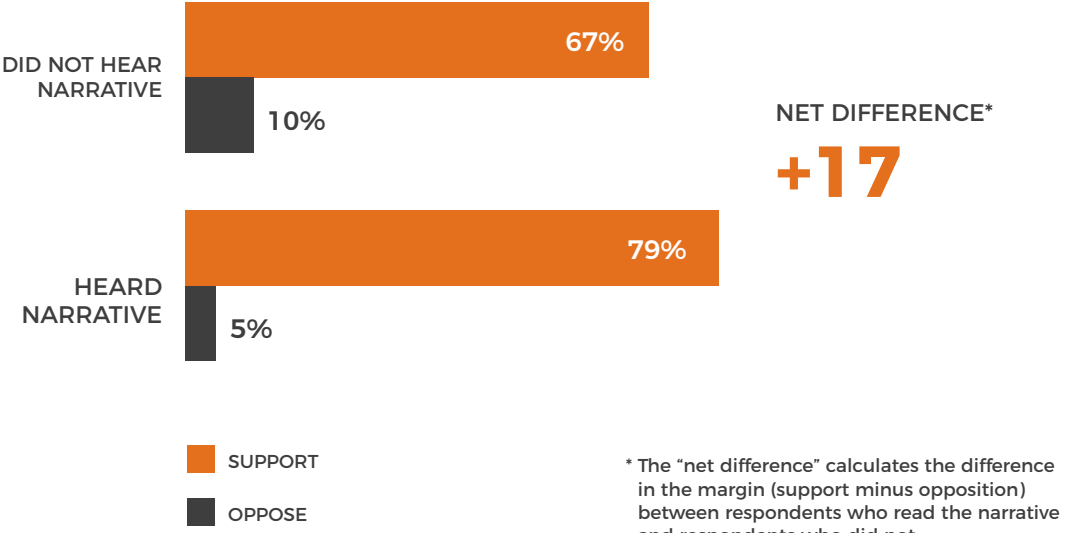
Legend:

- Values
- History
- Visibility
- Call to action

### Example One: The Importance of Upholding the Indian Child Welfare Act

- All children deserve to be raised by loving families in supportive communities, surrounded by the culture and heritage they know best.
- In Native cultures, family is defined very broadly. Everyone plays an active role in raising a child and is ready to help in times of crisis.
- But when the U.S. child welfare system was created, it was biased against raising a child in this way – as a community. As a result, the U.S. government removed Native children from their families – not because of abuse or neglect, but because of this communal way of being. The Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) was passed in 1978 to prevent Native American children from being unjustly taken away and adopted outside their culture.
- Today, however, ICWA is not consistently respected.
- We need to uphold and improve the law to make sure we are doing what is best for Native children.

This narrative works, as shown in the graph below.



### Example Two: The Need to Uphold Treaties and Sovereignty

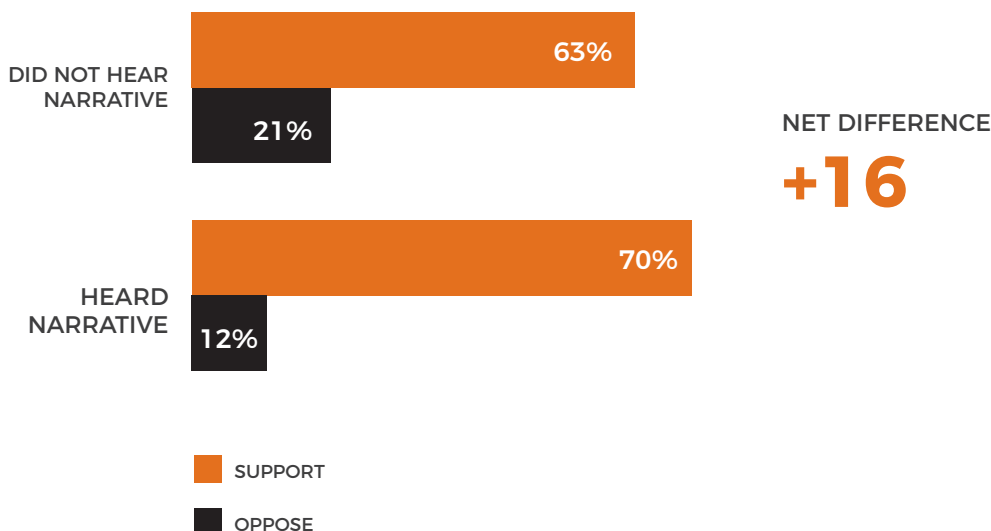
Honor and integrity are important values we all look for in other people. They're important values for countries, too. When a country makes an agreement or signs a treaty, you expect them to live up to it.

And yet, our own country has broken more than 500 treaties with Native nations that were here long before the United States was founded.

Today, there are more than 600 sovereign Native nations within the borders of the United States. Their residents are citizens of both their own Native nations and the United States, and they pay federal taxes like all Americans. Yet, federal and state governments, corporations and individuals continue to violate these treaties and challenge the sovereignty of these independent nations to set their own laws and do what is right for their own citizens.

It is only fair to honor the treaties with Native nations and to respect their sovereignty.

This narrative works, as shown in the graph below.



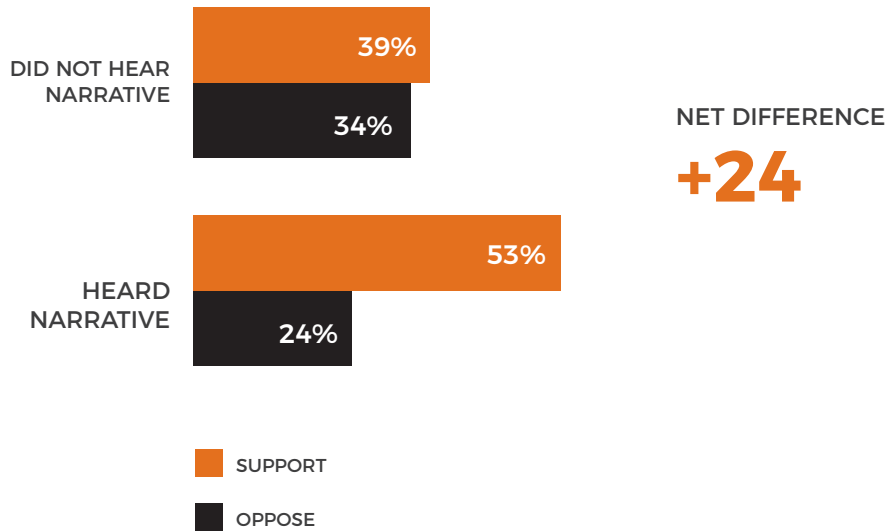


### Example Three: The Need to Ban Native-Themed Mascots

- Values
- History
- Visibility
- Call to action

- Our own culture and heritage are important parts of who we are and how we define ourselves.
- No one deserves to see their heritage insulted or ridiculed. Yet, for hundreds of years, Native Americans have been mocked and dehumanized by slurs and images in team mascots at every level, from elementary schools to professional sports.
- While some people mistakenly believe that these mascots are harmless or even respectful, the mascots actually represent a continued dehumanization of Native peoples and do real psychological harm to Native children.
- It's time to eliminate the use of Native American names, symbols and images as team mascots.

This narrative works, as shown in the graph below.



### Example Four: The Need for Native American Voices and Accurate Representation in Entertainment and Pop Culture

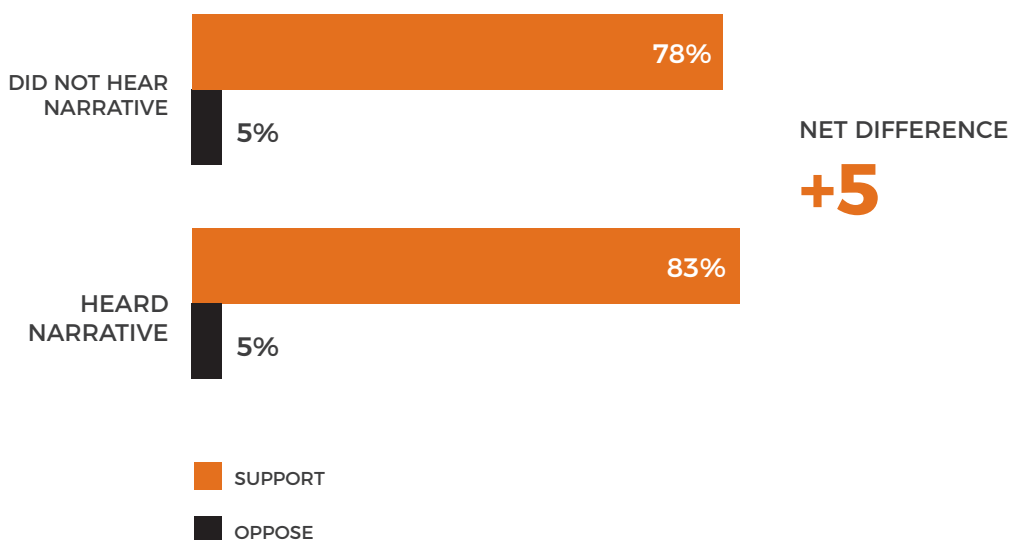
Throughout history and continuing today, representations of Native Americans in entertainment – from books to television shows to movies – have been based on negative stereotypes. Even portrayals that seem positive at first can be harmful if they romanticize Native culture and imply that all Native American peoples are the same. This often occurs because Native characters are played by non-Native people and because Native writers, producers, directors, actors, musicians and others are excluded from the industry.

The truth is that Native storytellers and artists have always been here, and they are increasingly creating and driving innovation in popular culture and the arts.

The stories and voices of Native American peoples connect with values that are core to American culture and that are needed today more than ever.

Hollywood needs to invest in and promote new Native stories in film and television, hire more Native artists, and replace false depictions with Native peoples’ stories.

This narrative works, as shown in the graph below. There is less of a change here than with the other issue-themed narratives because support starts very high, at 78 percent.



A group of water protectors travel to a sacred site near the Dakota Access to pray. Oceti Sakowin Camp 2016. Photograph by Josue Rivas



Chief Arvol Looking Horse prays near the Dakota Access Pipeline. Oceti Sakowin Camp 2016. Photograph by Josue Rivas



A water protector gets aid after getting pepper sprayed by law enforcement. Oceti Sakowin Camp 2016. Photograph by Josue Rivas



## Success Story: Standing Rock

Tens of thousands of individuals, hundreds of tribal nations and many allies stood with the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe in its opposition to a pipeline that threatened to destroy the tribe's drinking water, historic treaty lands and sacred sites. From August 2016 through February 2017, millions of Americans and a global audience witnessed a powerful narrative unfold. At a time when most Americans continued to believe that Native Americans and nations no longer exist in the United States, this movement forced a new conversation around values, identity and our collective connection to the Earth and the lands we live on.

The full analysis of this movement is complex; however, we have extracted a few key insights that align with and inform ongoing narrative change:

- The movement **interrupted the systemic erasure of Native Americans**. Contemporary Native Americans populated the daily news diet with articulate, powerful statements that followed an overall shared narrative.
- The movement's core organizers **controlled the narrative** and refused to let opponents and mainstream media define their movement.
- The narrative **centered on the sovereignty** of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe — and all tribal nations — as well as the collective threat that climate change and losing our drinking water poses to us all.
- All **four themes** appeared. The narrative brought **historic injustices** to the present, it was grounded in the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's traditional teachings and **cultural values**, it illustrated the **contemporary presence** and leadership of Native Americans and it **invited engagement and support** from across Indian Country, and from diverse non-Native allies around the world.
- The narrative was **repeated over and over**. The core, values-based message — *Mni Wiconi*/Water Is Life — reverberated across social media, citizen journalism and, eventually, mainstream news channels.
- **Many voices** carried the narrative, and everyone had a role. There was unprecedented collaboration and a coalescing of nearly 400 tribes. In addition, many non-Native allies joined the movement, and many remain engaged today.
- The power of Standing Rock wasn't just about narrative; it was also about combining **narrative change with grassroots action**. This made Standing Rock a powerful phenomenon that not only helped awaken understanding and shift perceptions about Native peoples but also elevated their voices and political power.

**This movement forced a new conversation around values, identity and our collective connection to the Earth and the lands we live on.**







# How to Join and Lead the Movement for Narrative Change

This new narrative creates a new chorus of many different voices singing in harmony. When many different people, organizations and movements start to use the new narrative in their unique work, the effect is one of “surround sound.” People across the United States begin hearing the same song across their networks of influencers and information sources. Over time, the more positive, accurate, forward-moving narrative becomes the story they are used to hearing.

You can join this chorus by using this new narrative, and the four narrative themes, when you develop messages, communications and programs. **The key is to ensure that every message and communication encompasses all four themes: values, history, visibility and call to action.** You can adapt them to create the most powerful statement for each specific occasion, audience, issue and call to action.



**Consider  
and  
act upon  
these  
questions:**

**How can I share my platform** to give voice to a diversity of Native peoples?

**What can I do to help** bring the new narrative to life in my communications or in my work?

**How can I ensure** that what I communicate or create reinforces the new narrative?

**How can I help** correct stereotypes, myths and misconceptions when I see or experience them?

## Join This Movement of Movements

**Link your organization, issue and movement to this work.** Visit [reclaimingnativetruth.com](http://reclaimingnativetruth.com) to learn more.

**Share this guide with everyone you work with** — in Indian Country and beyond — and ask them to join the movement. Commit to reciprocity, generosity and collaboration.

**Tell us how it's working.** In your conversations with the partners in this movement of movements (see pages 38–39), let us know what you're trying and what works. Don't know any of the partners yet? Feel free to reach out!

## Commit to Advancing the New Narrative in Every Communication, Experience and Action

### Go beyond words

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Experiment with how to make your messages, website, presentations, grant requests and other tools align with the narrative while retaining your unique voice. Consider how stories, data and images can advance the new narrative as much as words can. Use art and images that are contemporary, positive and strong to reinforce the new narrative.

Need images of contemporary Native peoples? Check out the works of the many talented Native photographers, painters, artists, writers and others working across the country.

### Reinforce the narrative internally

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Inside the organizations where you work or volunteer, use the narrative in conversations among staff and peers. Help each other see where you are inadvertently falling into a narrative based on deficits or weaknesses. Explore how you can shift your language to reinforce the new narrative based on values, history, visibility and a strong call to action.



## **Use the power and reach of social media**

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Especially among young people, social media has been essential in educating non-Natives about Native cultures and issues. Model the narrative through your social media words and images, and it will spread quickly across social channels. If you have a youth board or coalition, discuss the narrative with them and ask them to make it their own on social media.



Marcus Guinn, *Osage/Potawatomi*  
Photograph by Thomas Ryan RedCorn

## **Work with the news media**

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If you work with the news media, share story ideas that support the new narrative. If you see a story that perpetuates the old narrative, contact the reporter and/or submit a letter to the editor that brings all four themes together to correct the narrative and paint a more accurate picture. If you have a good relationship with a reporter, ask for a meeting to share this new information and the narrative, and ask him or her to move away from deficit-based reporting.

## **Take it to your board of directors, investors, vendors and partners, and other stakeholders**

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Use the narrative in all presentations and communication. Explicitly discuss the shift you're making and why. Invite them to join you in committing to the new narrative, and share this guide (or the guide for allies, available at [reclaimingnativetruth.com](http://reclaimingnativetruth.com)) with them.



### **Interrupt and correct the false narrative**

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If you hear or see others perpetuating myths, stereotypes or other aspects of the false narrative — whether out of ignorance or blatant racism — share with them the correct information in the narrative format.

### **Reach decision-makers**

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Use the new narrative, and the information in this guide about why it's so vital, in your conversations with decision-makers in education, law, business, entertainment, pop culture, the arts and other sectors. Ask them to commit to advancing the new narrative and disrupting the old one through their work.

## **Share it widely and broadly**

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Talk about the narrative, and the power of narrative change, with your children and their teachers, with your friends and tribal leaders, with your industry colleagues and with many others.



## Engage Stakeholders and Allies

Native voices absolutely must lead the shift toward a new narrative. We must be the authors of our own story — past and present. And we can't do it all alone. Allies want to help and often don't know how. They can sometimes make unintentional, offensive and unhelpful missteps. Or, out of fear of doing something wrong, they stay silent. By engaging them, and sharing this new narrative, we can help them be more effective and to stand by us as the allies they wish to be.

### Share the tools

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If you work with funders, allies, partners and other non-Native organizations, schedule a time to share the new narrative with them and invite them to start using it. You can download the guide for allies at [reclaimingnativetruth.com](http://reclaimingnativetruth.com). Discuss how using these new narratives and following this project's recommendations can strengthen their work on racial equity and social justice. Focus on how working together can make you both more effective.

### Come from a place of reciprocity

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Before you visit with an ally, if you haven't already, explore the ally's values, motivators and barriers. You can do this by reading interviews in the news media, following their social media accounts or studying their website. Then approach the conversation from the perspective of what you share in common, how you can support their work, and common goals you can work on together. Ask for what you need, and think about what you can offer in return.



“If we allow ourselves to stay on an island and only talk to Indian Country, we are not going to make a lot of progress in narrative change because we are preaching to the choir. Strategic partnerships with mainstream media and other organizations will not dilute our message, it will magnify it.”

Bryan Pollard (*Cherokee*), President, Native American Journalists Association Board of Directors; Director of Tribal Relations, Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative, University of Arkansas



Nakee Jack, Navajo/Lemhi-Shoshone/Bannock/Spokane/Colville;  
Willow Abrahamson, Lemhi-Shoshone/Bannock/Spokane/Colville  
Photograph by Thomas Ryan RedCorn

## **Understand allies' needs and blind spots**

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The research team for this project interviewed non-Native potential allies in federal and state government, business, civil rights, law, media and entertainment to understand their perceptions and needs. It goes without saying that it is their job to educate themselves about Native history, issues, cultures and relationships. But knowing their blind spots and needs provides valuable perspective on how we might connect and create relationships.

### **For example:**

—→ **Non-Native professionals are interested in working with more Native Americans but do not know how to find us.** For example, to improve storytelling, media and entertainment leaders recognize that they must improve representation on writing staffs and in acting casts — but they often are not successful. Explore ways that you can make your organization a resource to allies and organizations that are seeking information, introductions and connections for hiring Native Americans, working with Native organizations and tribes, or working on Native issues. How can you help build bridges and offer assistance so that non-Natives no longer can say, “We can’t find anyone”?

—→ **Non-Native people and organizations often do not understand the concept of sovereignty.** Native-run organizations in some states have offered tours and educational training sessions for government agency staff and legislators to increase knowledge of treaties and how government-to-government relationships should work. You can create a short, one-page fact sheet and/or share information from the National Congress of American Indians’ guide at [www.ncai.org/about-tribes](http://www.ncai.org/about-tribes).

—→ **In fact, many people often do not understand Native issues in general — but they are open to learning more.** Create more opportunities (visits, tours, discussions, etc.) for allies to learn more about the issues facing and affecting Native peoples and why they are applicable to the ally organization’s mission. The NCAI guide listed above is a good resource here, too.





William Hamilton, *Osage/Pawnee/Acoma/Potawatomi*  
Photograph by Thomas Ryan RedCorn

→ **Business leaders see the potential for stronger relationships with tribes.** They suggested bringing tribes and businesses together to exchange information so that businesses can better understand the skills and other resources available in Indian Country and Native groups can better understand the needs of the business community.

→ **Some non-Natives are wary of situations in which they risk offending Native Americans, and they lose confidence in their ability to speak and engage openly.** Providing them with the ally version of this guide — and offering to have a conversation about issues, terminology and working together — can help.





Laverne Cook-Wise, *Tlingit*; Esther Lucero, *Navajo*; Justice Dominy, *Tlingit & Assiniboine Sioux*  
Photo source: TONL.com

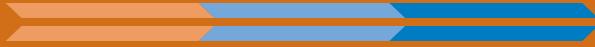
## Working with Other Communities of Color

In interviews conducted for this project, civil rights leaders said that they did not see Native American groups and activists playing a leading role in the national conversation on equity.<sup>3</sup> They invite more involvement, especially given today's political climate. There also has been an uptick in discussions about intersectionality and collaboration among organizations representing different groups. More and more groups are taking a stand for other groups and getting publicly involved in conversations not directly related to them — conversations that they might have stayed out of just a few years ago.

Groups fighting on behalf of other marginalized peoples, particularly Latino groups, recognize that Native Americans share many similar struggles. They encourage more coordination and collaboration. These groups are under the same pressure as Native organizations to raise money and advance their missions. As you talk with such groups about using the new narrative and supporting Native issues, also offer ways you can bring something to the table. For example, can you share information about their issues with your followers? Endorse their issues? Help with connections to others who can collaborate with them? Look for ways to create a win-win relationship.

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to stay focused on equity, rather than race, when talking with other communities of color. Native rights and issues are about tribal citizenship and sovereignty, not race.



“We start with the premise of mutual respect and educating people on specific issues, understanding that people start at different places. There is an entry point for everyone on these issues, no matter where they come from, and we try to talk in a way that doesn’t put people on the defensive. Highlighting examples of people taking positive steps can be helpful in getting people to not be reflexive on these issues.”

Joel Barkin, Vice President of Communications,  
Oneida Indian Nation

# The Collaborators Behind This Guide

Thank you for your interest in this effort. Creating lasting change will take commitment, creativity and collaboration among all of us — Native Americans and non-Native allies alike. We hope you will join us in changing the narrative and increasing respect, opportunity and equity for Native Americans, as well as building a stronger and more just society for all people.

This work began as *Reclaiming Native Truth*, a collaborative initiative of Echo Hawk Consulting and First Nations Development Institute.



FIRST NATIONS  
DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE

ECHO HAWK  
CONSULTING

It has since transitioned into a movement of movements, with many people advising, inspiring and supporting this work, from initial research through development of the new narrative and this message guide. In particular, we express our gratitude to the following people, who were instrumental in creating the narrative and this guide:

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The McKnight Foundation

Robert Wood Johnson  
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**W.K.  
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# Appendix: Long Version of the Narrative

This narrative was created especially for Native peoples and organizations who want to apply the narrative to their work. There is also a version of this narrative for use by allies. The themes and meaning are the same, but the voice is different. If you're interested in comparing the two, you can find the guide for allies at [reclaimingnativetruth.com](http://reclaimingnativetruth.com).

Important note: All four themes must be used together in every communication. We break them out here to clarify the intention of each theme. Together, they form the long version of the new narrative. When you are creating narrative-based messages, be sure to incorporate all four themes. You may use or modify elements of the language that follows if it works, or you may develop your own way to express your issue through all four themes.

## Values theme

Native values anchor Native cultures and have defined U.S. society. We live our values by building multigenerational relationships based on respect, reciprocity and responsibility. We listen to, learn from and serve our families, the land, the water, Native nations and all our circles of friends and allies. We offer thousands of years of accumulated knowledge and share our strengths and struggles in order to build a stronger and more resilient future for all.

## History theme

Our history is our strength, and our strength is our history. We honor our nations and ancestors who have shaped our commitments, root us to place and enable our future. Our shared story is our strength, a living and evolving history of resistance, resilience and cultural revitalization in every tribal nation and every Indigenous person. Our story is embodied in our land, arts, sciences, philosophies, literature, foods, political structures, justice systems, cultures and all the other gifts we have contributed to the United States and many other nations. We demonstrate this strength and generosity despite enduring theft of our lands and languages, having our children wrenched from our homes and nations, and being forced to assimilate. We have survived genocide, and we remain strong despite our continued mourning for the far too many who did not survive and despite countless broken promises and forced removals. Continued injustices are visible in distortions taught in schools as history,

misunderstanding of tribal sovereignty, and disrespect for our humanity and cultures in demeaning stereotypes and appropriations. In our resiliency, we see our character as Native peoples.

## Visibility theme

As one of the youngest and fastest-growing populations in the country, our youth are carrying forth the next generation of our work, life and culture. Too often, though, we remain invisible to most people in the United States. The truth is that we are resilient, strong and vibrant contributors to our families, Native nations, every profession and communities across the United States. We build on more than 500 years of resiliency to grow stronger each day. In our actions, the world sees we have historical longevity and an endless future.

## Call-to-action theme

Native Americans' wisdom, values, historical experiences and creative resilience are greatly needed in the world. We are working together and with our allies to develop collective solutions that respect Native nations and care for our lands and waters, our urban and rural communities, our country, and our planet.

Let's find commonalities, celebrate our differences and work together for our shared future and the futures of the coming generations.



**For more information or to follow and join this movement of movements, please visit [reclaimingnativetruth.com](http://reclaimingnativetruth.com).**



[www.firstnations.org](http://www.firstnations.org)



[www.echohawkconsulting.com](http://www.echohawkconsulting.com)