

Tips for Partnering with Tribal Nations in Washington State

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Based on my experience piloting the “Tribal Guide to Maritime Washington,” this document outlines a few lessons learned for engaging with Tribal nations as partners on projects or initiatives. Key phases included project preparation, partnership outreach, project execution, and maintaining the relationship. Note that this document is prepared with nonprofits in mind; because Tribes are sovereign nations, governmental entities will follow different partnership protocols.

Special thanks to Todd Clark from Washington State Historical Society for offering invaluable feedback on this list.

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PROJECT PREPARATION

BUILD A STRONG FOUNDATION

- Recognize Tribes as sovereign governments, not stakeholder groups.
- Understand that partnerships may require formal approvals (e.g., from Tribal Council, MOUs).
- Build internal readiness: assess existing staff knowledge, identify anticipated time commitment, and plan for flexibility.

DO YOUR HOMEWORK

- Learn about treaties, treaty rights, and how they impact the Tribal nations you work with (especially regarding fishing and shellfish harvesting).
- Research the Tribe's current priorities, programs, and challenges.
- Identify where your organization can support existing efforts.

ENSURE CONSENT AND TRANSPARENCY

- Practice free, prior, and informed consent:
 - Be clear about goals, timelines, funding, and expectations.
 - Engage Tribes early: they should have an active role in determining and defining the project before it begins.
 - Be prepared for the Tribe to redirect or decline the project. Demonstrate that your organization recognizes the Tribe's authority to do so.

PARTNERSHIP OUTREACH

MAKE CONTACT THOUGHTFULLY

- Prioritize phone or in-person outreach over email.
- Contact relevant departments or committees first.
- Consider writing a formal letter to Tribal Council introducing your project vision requesting to present at an upcoming meeting.

CO-CREATE CLEAR AND FLEXIBLE EXPECTATIONS

- Clearly outline:
 - What you're asking of the Tribe (time, labor, resources).
 - What compensation is available.
 - How the Tribe may benefit.
- Identify what aspects of the project are flexible, and what are not.
- Ask questions and invite Tribal direction and input.
- Partnerships should be co-created, meaning both parties fill a leadership role.

BUDGET FOR FAIR COMPENSATION

- Plan to compensate collaborators for:
 - Staff time (when appropriate).
 - Elders and cultural knowledge-bearers.
 - Meetings, consultation, and review.
- Treat compensation as standard practice, not optional.

- Note that cultural norms may inform what type or amount of compensation/honorarium is acceptable. Always ask your Tribal collaborators for guidance in this regard.
- Gifts are always appropriate, regardless of whether compensation is accepted. It is best practice to bring a gift, no matter how small, in gratitude for a Tribal member's time and knowledge.
- Always accept gifts if they are offered. Giving and receiving gifts is an important way of maintaining relationships, and refusing to accept a gift may be considered offensive.

ESTABLISH STRONG POINTS OF CONTACT

- Identify:
 - **A cultural advisor** (elder or knowledge-keeper)
 - This person may not be fully involved in program logistics, but they should be consulted regularly about cultural protocol and the cultural significance of program activities. Establishing this relationship with an elder or knowledge-bearer demonstrates that your organization respects Tribal cultural authority, and also helps you identify potential points of tension/conflict early on.
 - **A program/logistics contact** (staff or representative)
 - This should be someone who can 1) connect you with relevant Tribal members/employees, 2) facilitate review of any content, project proposals, program assessments, etc.; and 3) offer logistical guidance throughout the project. This person may be a Tribal employee and/or a Tribal member. This is often the person who can help you put the elder/knowledge-bearer's guidance into action and help move things along on the Tribal side of the partnership.
- Remember: no one person speaks for the entire Tribe.

PROJECT EXECUTION

RESPECT CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE & DATA SOVEREIGNTY

- Ask permission before recording, sharing, or publishing content about a Tribe. Some information isn't intended for public access.
- Clarify how information will be used, who has authority over it, and how that authority will be maintained.
 - For example, I often conduct interviews with Tribal members for my research. I ask for consent to record these interviews, give interviewees the option to review any content before I use it for anything public-facing, share a copy of all interview materials (consent form, recording, transcript) with interviewees, and offer to deposit the recordings in the Tribal museum for preservation.
- Provide opportunities for Tribal review and approval (usually through committees and/or Tribal Council)
- Always consult the Language Department about translations or the use of Indigenous words. It's easy to mess these up!

MOVE AT THE SPEED OF THE RELATIONSHIP

- Build in time for ongoing check-ins and feedback.
- Be flexible with timelines and expectations (see point below regarding capacity).
- Follow up regularly and respectfully. Relationship-building takes persistence and time.

RECOGNIZE COLLABORATOR CAPACITY

- Be aware of:
 - Limited Tribal staff capacity and resources
 - Tribes are disproportionately impacted by funding cuts in an already unequal playing field.
 - Different Tribes have different capacities. Do not expect two Tribes to move at the same speed, even if the projects are the same.
 - Cultural responsibilities beyond job roles
 - Many Tribal members are filling important cultural roles, which take time and priority. Government offices may close due to a death in the Tribe, and meetings may get canceled last minute to accommodate cultural practices, fishing or harvesting openings, or other circumstances beyond your control. Do not take such cancellations personally—they're part and parcel of ongoing collaborations.
 - Alternative timelines
 - While businesses and nonprofits may think, act, and plan around funding cycles, Tribal nations think, act, and plan with future generations in mind. This means that projects may follow a different timeline than you are accustomed to, as Tribes take care to think about a project's long-term implications for the community.
- Approach with humility, patience, and reciprocity
 - Remember that your Tribal collaborators are experts on their culture and their Tribe's priorities. Respect that expertise, and make it clear that you are willing to use *your* expertise to support Tribal initiatives.

START SMALL WHEN NEEDED

- A Tribe may not always have the capacity or desire for large-scale partnerships. Be open to smaller scale relationship-building in lieu of larger projects. Consider offering to:
 - Participate in career fairs, guest talks, or workshops
 - Provide volunteer or other support for Tribal events
 - Use your platforms (social media, newsletters, etc.) to share or amplify relevant Tribal projects
- Use these small efforts to build trust and relationships over time

CONFIRM LEGAL AND FORMAL REQUIREMENTS

- Ask your collaborators whether your project requires:
 - Tribal Council or other entity's approval.
 - MOUs or formal agreements.
 - Permits, research review, or compliance with laws like the National Historic Preservation Act.

MAINTAINING THE RELATIONSHIP

FOLLOW THROUGH AND STAY ACCOUNTABLE

- Share results, outcomes, and final products with the Tribe (direct collaborators as well as Tribal Council).
- Offer:
 - Tribal previews (for content or exhibits).
 - Presentations or reports back to the Tribe.
 - Copies of your work/resulting products for Tribal records.
- Define success with the Tribe, not just internally. Do this early on, and revisit periodically with collaborators.

COMMIT TO LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS

- Stay engaged beyond a single project.
- Make a practice of attending Tribal events and following Tribal news. A relationship goes both ways—you need to show up for their activities and initiatives as well.
- Work on incorporating Indigenous perspectives into *all* of your work.
- Look for ongoing ways to support Tribal priorities.
- Avoid one-off partnerships, especially those without a clear benefit to the Tribe.