Best Practices for Tribal Engagement

SF ESTUARY
Wetlands Regional Monitoring Program

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Purpose: These best practices are intended to empower additional partners in our networks to meaningfully engage with Tribes in their work, such as developing proposals for scientific studies, working with Tribal data/information, and designing engagement processes. This document is not specific to formal Tribal consultation (see resources listed at the bottom), nor is it a step-by-step guide to working with Tribes. **Please note that best practices, as well as preferred terminology, vary by Tribe and can evolve over time. Above all, be humble and open to being corrected.**

Background: This document was created by staff and partners of the San Francisco Estuary Wetlands Regional Monitoring Program at the suggestion of the Association of Ramaytush Ohlone, who represent the original peoples of the San Francisco Peninsula. Contributors include the SF Bay Joint Venture, SF Estuary Partnership, SF Estuary Institute, SF Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, and SF Bay Restoration Authority/State Coastal Conservancy. Sources used to compile the best practices are listed at the end of the document.

1. **Understand the history and context of the Tribe(s) you are working with.**
    - Learn about all Tribes in your geographic area of interest. Tribes have different cultures, languages, values, and perceptions of the Universe. Even within the same Tribe there may be differing opinions on a particular topic.
    - Tribal leadership structures and protocols for engagement may vary. Find out who makes the decisions for the Tribe (this may be a governing body of several people or a single person) and their preferences for engagement.
    - Not all Tribes are state or federally recognized. Non-federally or state recognized Tribes face more barriers, such as limited financial or technical capacity to engage on projects.
    - Understand that there is long-term generational trauma and many historical examples of broken trust with Tribal nations.
    - Tribal stances may be impacted by things outside of your control; complicated relationships with regulatory agencies may keep a Tribe from engaging with you for reasons unrelated to your organization or project.
    - Urban Indians are one of the most overlooked populations of Native Americans in the US. Connect with those in your regions. Organizations like Urban Indian health organizations may be able to help.
    - Some questions you may consider asking to better understand context are: 1) Is the Tribe federally recognized? 2) Do they have land? 3) What is the Tribe(s) currently advocating for?
2. **Take time to build trust and long-standing relationships with Tribes.**
    - Speak with all Tribes in your geographic region of interest to learn about their interest/ability and willingness to collaborate.
    - Research the proper process for contacting each Tribe. It may be best to contact Tribal staff, as elders and leaders have limited time and resources.
    - Be persistent (if you don't hear back, reach out again).
    - Ask for permission to engage with Tribes and their knowledge and time.
    - Find a Tribal liaison with whom you can connect and continue to build a relationship.
    - Be clear and forthright about goals, including potential benefits and negative impacts. Be transparent about the degree of certainty of benefits.
    - Attend and participate in local Tribal events to show your support.

3. **Practice reciprocity.**
   - Ask if there is anything the Tribe needs that you might be able to offer before asking for anything in return. Dedicated time from a staff member to provide technical assistance is one example, though the offer should be guided by the Tribe's expressed needs.
   - Follow up throughout the entire project process from beginning to after completion. Consider cultural background, literacy levels, and relevance to everyday life for the audience when communicating science. Clearly define terms, avoid using acronyms, and include context and background information.
4. **Don't speak on behalf of Tribes.**
   - Listen.
   - Invite Tribal members to express their needs to specific audiences, rather than taking the ideas and intellectual property of Tribes to public agencies or funders.
   - While it's best to enable Tribes to speak for themselves, consider ways you can support. Examples include educating peers on cultural sensitivity and advocating for a seat at the table for Tribes.
5. **Respect Tribal knowledge, practices, leadership, and individuals.**
   - Respect the traditional and scientific knowledge that Tribes have. Understand that Western science and traditional knowledge are fundamentally different.
   - Recognize that Tribes are independent nations with their own governments and constituencies.
   - Treat Tribal leadership the same way you would treat the President of the United States or the CEO of a major corporation. Ask how leaders would like to be addressed.
   - Recognize the value that Tribal representatives bring to the table.
6. **Co-develop projects with Tribes as full collaborators.**
   - Consult with Tribes before beginning a project, to learn their thoughts on the issues and ideas for addressing them.
   - Ensure that Tribes are funded for their participation.
   - Be willing to alter timelines according to Tribal partners; they often operate on a separate timeline than grant cycles or program cycles.
   - Tribal partners should lay the ground rules on what information can and cannot be shared and must have the opportunity to review materials before publishing.
   - Recognize that the issues and areas important to Tribes may evolve over time.
7. **Recognize and address barriers to participation, such as:**
   - Distrust due to historic injustice and broken promises – Acknowledge history and don't overpromise.
   - Concern about impacts to relationships with agencies that support the work of Tribes (e.g. retribution for reporting environmental issues) – Keep information confidential or anonymous to alleviate these concerns.
   - Accessibility of meeting times and locations, including virtual meetings and online information – Consult with the Tribe about what formats are accessible.
   - Competing events and priorities – Recognize that the time may not be right to pursue your project.
   - Funding – Help Tribes apply for grants and share resources such as funding opportunities.
   - Volume of requests for input and engagement – Coordinate with others asking for similar input/engagement.
8. **Build and/or supplement your own capacity and skills.**
   - Consider engaging professional help (e.g. an experienced Tribal representative with established relationships).
   - Build internal cultural sensitivity, even if a consultant or Tribal liaison is leading engagement. Tribes themselves may assist with training or suggest resources (including cultures, protocols, treaty rights, and the world views of the Tribes impacted).

To learn about best practices for grant programs, see the [SFEP Regional Water Needs Assessment chapter](#) on Best Practices for Equitable and Accessible Grant Programs.

Sources

In addition to suggestions and review from the Association of Ramaytush Ohlone, contributors used the following sources:

All of Us Research Program. (2018). *Considerations for Meaningful Collaboration with Tribal Populations*. https://allofus.nih.gov/sites/default/files/tribal_collab_work_group_rept.pdf

Cruz, C.M. (2008). *Tribal Best Practices: There Are Many Pathways.* Oregon Department of Human Services. https://www.oregon.gov/oha/HSD/AMH/docs/Tribal-Best-Practices.pdf

Dardar, T., Dardar, D., Parfait-Dardar, S., Parfait, D. (2023, Dec. 6). *Meaningfully Partnering with Indigenous Communities* [Conference session]. 2022 Coastal & Estuarine Summit, New Orleans, LA, United States.

Evans, E. and Werkheiser, M. (n.d.). *Top Ten Considerations When Engaging with American Indian Tribes.* Cultural Heritage Partners. Retrieved December 14, 2022, from http://www.culturalheritagepartners.com/top-ten-considerations-engaging-american-indian-tribes/

San Francisco Estuary Partnership. (2022). *SFEP Regional Water Needs Assessment - Best Practices for Equitable and Accessible Grant Programs.* https://www.sfestuary.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/SFEP_RWNA_11_PracticesForEquity.090922.pdf

U.S. Department of Labor. (n.d.). *Best Practices: Creating an Inclusive Workforce for Native Americans*. Retrieved December 14, 2022, from https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ofccp/compliance-assistance/outreach/indians-native-americans/best-practices

Additional Resources

Government-to-Government Consultation

https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2022/11/30/memorandum-on-uniform-standards-for-tribal-consultation/

https://ohp.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=1071#:~:text=The%20OHP%20is%20charged%20with,adverse%20effects%20to%20heritage%20resources

https://www.slc.ca.gov/tribal-consultation/