

© Henry Huntington

Arctic char drying at a camp near Clyde River, Nunavut, Canada.

What Do Land Acknowledgments Acknowledge?

by Henry P. Huntington

Land acknowledgments—statements about the Indigenous Peoples on whose lands others live and work—have become increasingly common in Australia, Canada, the United States, and elsewhere. The acknowledgments take different forms but typically name the Indigenous inhabitants of the place in question, often describe the

status of the lands today, and may include an expression of gratitude for Indigenous stewardship as well as other information and appreciation. Such statements are a welcome improvement over ignoring or avoiding histories of dispossession through violence, deceit, and other means.

As a non-Indigenous person, I have no right to judge the adequacy or merits

of land acknowledgments from the Indigenous point of view. Instead, I reflect here on what this practice makes me think about in terms of the relationships between Indigenous Peoples and the societies in which they now find themselves, as well as my own role in Arctic research and policy.

The need to make a land acknowledgment at all, to state publicly what has long



George Noongwook from Savoonga, Alaska, singing a St. Lawrence Island Yupik song.

been suppressed, stems from awareness that something wrong has been done. The fact that the original wrong may have been committed generations ago does not exonerate settlers today from our role in perpetuating a legacy of removal and genocide. Land acknowledgments reflect awareness of history and of injustice, which is a start. Recognizing an unjust history is important but does not necessarily require

action. Recognizing an unjust present, on the other hand, creates a moral obligation to act for justice and equity.

Injustice is not found only in history. The symptoms of injustice run far and deep: Indigenous Peoples today endure higher rates of poverty, suicide, poor health, substance abuse, and other ills than do people in the general population. Indigenous women in particular are murdered or missing at alarmingly

high rates, all too often with little or no effort to find those responsible. Reservations relegate Indigenous Peoples to the geographical margins of society. Assimilationist policies, including erasure of Indigenous histories, marginalize Indigenous cultural identities on and off reservations. Many sacred sites are now overrun with tourists, transforming the sacred into entertainment and leaving no time or space for Indigenous ceremonies, let alone the respect such sites deserve. Other sacred sites are destroyed to make way for some form of “progress.” Although awareness is a necessary precursor to action, a signpost acknowledging Indigenous occupancy does little to resolve deep-rooted inequities.

Effective actions to redress the wrongs done to Indigenous Peoples via settler colonialism and racism will not be easy. Physical colonization has taken place over centuries. The lands from which people were forcibly removed now see vast infrastructure as well as widespread environmental degradation. Psychological colonization has also taken place for centuries, creating an even more insidious pattern of diminished self-worth and lowered expectations for what is just and what is possible. This trend is now reversing, due to greater awareness of its effects and to successful efforts by Indigenous Peoples to restore pride in their identities, histories, and capabilities. The colonizers, too, have created for ourselves a web of privilege fueled by white supremacy, habit, assumption, and prejudice that will not be easy to correct and remediate.

In Arctic North America, though they have lost control over much of their traditional territory, Indigenous Peoples have faced less geographic displacement than other Indigenous people and continue to practice many traditional ways on their lands and waters. However, colonization has still done much damage here, too, through loss of languages and ceremonies, restrictions on travel and trade, regulations limiting the use of some animals, and more. Economic assimilation has created opportunities



© Henry Huntington

An Inuit man building a snow igloo near Clyde River, Nunavut, Canada.

but also leads to conflicts between traditional patterns of activity and the demands of the workaday world. Many are working to rebuild the bridge to their ancestral way of being, but also are confronted with a Western reality that requires a daily integration of their Indigenous ways of being into a system that is not their own.

Land acknowledgments in the Arctic must reflect continuing practices such as hunting marine mammals and the deep physical and spiritual relationships that Arctic Indigenous Peoples have with the world around them. Acknowledging Indigenous lands includes acknowledging Indigenous Peoples' right to make their own choices, according to their own

values and aspirations. Recognizing Indigenous societies in their own terms is a logical outcome of the principles behind land acknowledgments. That means recognizing *their* understanding of respectful relationships with the environment and with other people, not just those aspects that conveniently coincide with my own views.



Caleb Pungowiyi in a traditional bird netting blind near Savoonga, Alaska, demonstrating his people's way of catching birds.



Inupiaq whaling camp on the ice edge, northern Alaska.



Inuit youth enjoying a snack of Arctic char, Baffin Island, Canada.

I may be a visitor to the Arctic, but I still hope that my perspective can add to the conversation about the region's future. Perhaps that mere statement disqualifies me from any decolonizing pretensions I may have. Nonetheless, the goal of my work is to benefit the Arctic, its peoples, and its future. Enacting this goal humbly and with equity requires me to change the way I look at the world and to change the actions I am in

the habit of taking, personally and professionally. I must decouple my identity and behavior from that of the habitual colonizer. I do not always know best. My values are not always universal. My understanding is not always deeper. But learning a new way of looking at the world enriches me.

If I am willing to acknowledge that I live and work on Indigenous lands and waters, I must be prepared to back

my words with actions and attitudes that match.

ORCID

Henry P. Huntington  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2308-8677>

Henry P. Huntington is the Arctic Science Director for Ocean Conservancy.

© 2021 Ocean Conservancy.

Copyright of Environment is the property of Taylor & Francis Ltd and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.