

The Complexities of Land Acknowledgments: Not Just 'Checking A Box'

Maine Summer Camps continues to strive to help its members learn and teach about the history and culture of Maine's Wabanaki people. It is a complex subject that demands thoughtful attention and a commitment to true education. Camp Wawenock Co-Director Catriona Sangster and Hidden Valley Camp Co-Director Peter Kassen are both founding members of MSC's Native American Working Group. They shared their insights on the role of land acknowledgments and how they fit into the larger picture of truly understanding camps' connections to Maine's first populations.

Land Acknowledgements Defined

Land acknowledgements are just a small part of the process of teaching and learning about the people who originally lived on Maine camps' land. As the Museum of the American Indian at the Smithsonian, and its program Native Knowledge 360° (NK360°) define it, a land acknowledgment is a "traditional custom that dates back centuries in many Native nations and communities. Today, land acknowledgments are used by Native Peoples and non-Natives to recognize Indigenous Peoples who are the original stewards of the lands on which we now live." The NK360° initiative provides educators and students with new perspectives on Native American history and cultures. Here in Maine, Wabanaki REACH is one organization that seeks to make similar strides.

MSC's Actions

Maine Summer Camps' commitment to issues related to Maine's Wabanaki peoples has been a top priority since the organization received outreach in 2020 from members of the Penobscot Nation regarding concerns about cultural appropriation in Maine camps. Members of the MSC board met with former Penobscot Chief Barry Dana and Tribal Ambassador Maulian Dana to seek their input and wisdom. In early 2021 MSC reviewed and removed content link to its website that depicted cultural appropriation and also reached out to member camps to raise awareness about cultural appropriation. In addition, the Native American Working Group was formed to consider additional plans for addressing this vital issue.

In April of 2022, University of Maine Orono anthropology professor Darren Ranco, a member of the Penobscot Nation, presented a webinar to MSC members specifically focused on land acknowledgments, including their significance, limitations, as well as intention and the importance of follow-through.

Those vital elements of knowledge and understanding are foremost on the minds of directors and staff of many MSC camps as they seek to share with their camp communities the history, culture and importance of Maine's Wabanaki peoples. Catriona Sangster (Wawenock) and Peter Kassen (Hidden Valley Camp) have taken similar but not identical steps as they and their staff work toward their goals.

Hidden Valley Camp's Approach

At Hidden Valley Camp, a land acknowledgment and history of the land in at the camp's Montville site have both been placed on the camp's website. But this "immediate forward-facing" information is only a small element of the camp's efforts and commitment to expand knowledge and understanding, Kassen said.

"It's not a formal invocation. It's more like it becomes part of some more comprehensive, appropriate conversation," he said. Staff and campers alike are learning about the subject of Wabanaki history and culture, he said. The camp's efforts represent a commitment to weave the information "into the fabric of general understanding of camp's place."

"It's good for staff and campers to hear but we need to return to it and provide a more comprehensive education for campers," Kassen said. "It's analogous to other things," he said. "If all you did was [teach] the Pledge of Allegiance, would you have citizens who could make contributions to society? You need to do more." Without deeper and broader education, land acknowledgments have a "check-the-box formality," that doesn't sufficiently address the need for better understanding, he said.

Kassen is optimistic about the camp's efforts. "I feel like we are doing well, and we are just getting started," he said. "We are certainly not at a point where we can say 'mission accomplished.'" But he expresses hope, first because "the majority of camps have bought into this," and also because tribal members he has spoken with have been "optimistic and encouraging."

Efforts at Camp Wawenock

At Camp Wawenock, Catriona Sangster describes a slightly different approach but with the same goal: to increase education and understanding. The camp has not crafted or publicized a formal land acknowledgment but rather has begun "addressing things at camp we felt needed to be addressed," beginning with education, she said.

For example, two summers ago the camp made changes to what had historically been called its annual "council fire," and renamed the ceremony. It also renamed the camps' traditional two "tribes" to "teams." Together with campers, Sangster says, staff did an "overhaul" of that ceremony, "looking at what we felt had been taken from Indigenous or other cultures and what was authentically camp and what was important about the ceremony for camp."

The process included removing anything appropriated from Wabanaki culture, she said. But much of the ceremony remained unchanged, "because it was just what we did; it was not appropriated."

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Addressing this issue “is a process,” Sangster said. “This year in particular we tried to add more of an acknowledgment of the history of people who had previously lived in harmony with this land,” she said. That includes the question of “where it makes sense to embed more history.”

Sangster says the camp also confronted the issue of song language. “We put an acknowledgment in our song book because we made a decision not to change the language,” she said. For example, some songs refer to the “council fire” and “tribes” and the song book now explains “why those words appear, what we’ve learned,” and the importance of such understanding.

"We all evolve over time and what's most important is the idea of 'when you know better, you do better.' That in itself is a lesson to kids that they should understand we should all be open to having that growth mindset."

“It’s an effort to put perspective on what transpired at camp and how we are looking at it differently,” she said.

The discussion process around these issues provides a learning opportunity for campers that extend beyond the Wabanakis’ historical and cultural elements, Sangster said. “I feel like camp

is a place where it is important for kids to learn that nobody is perfect, no institution is perfect,” she said. “We all evolve over time and what’s most important is the idea of ‘when you know better, do better.’ That in itself is a lesson to kids that they should understand we should all be open to having that growth mindset.”

Addressing these issues, and communicating with present and past campers about them, demonstrates the “power of the camp experience,” Sangster said. “If we are perpetuating false narratives, that’s really detrimental to campers and Indigenous Peoples. We need to right that wrong.”

This comes with a challenge, she said, because that history “is ugly and awful.” There needs to be a balance between being truthful and understanding — “not to make these kids feel guilty, but also have an awareness.”

NAWG’s Plans

MSC’s NAWG members are discussing how to provide camps with resources “around this idea of education, history, and culture,” Kassen said. “Camps need to understand what their native neighbors look like.” One idea, said Sangster, is to identify potential Wabanaki educators who could visit camps and share information. “The hope would be to have a resource list for camps.” ■

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