

Welcome to Country: A guide

The importance of including a Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country at the beginning of any event or meeting or even at the beginning of a day at school or work is an act of reconciliation in and of itself. It is a simple way of acknowledging and demonstrating an understanding of the complex relationship of living on and in the Country of the oldest continuous living cultures in the world.

The genuine and heartfelt practice of Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement to Country is a custom that allows truth telling to take place and demonstrates an understanding that the land always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have experienced significant exclusion from Australian society for many years. Because of this, many non-Indigenous Australians have not had the opportunity to learn about, and celebrate, the rich cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This contributes to a disparity between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians that persists today. Acknowledging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in events is one part of ending this exclusion. It recognises the place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the first custodians of this land and, importantly, promotes awareness of the history and culture of Indigenous peoples. This increased awareness will help us create a more united Australia, that celebrates and embraces First Australians. It promotes an ongoing connection to place for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and shows respect for Traditional Owners and recognises that there are over 200 different First Nations groups and languages in Australia. Each should be celebrated for its own significance.

A **Welcome to Country** is a ceremony performed by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Elders, or Traditional Owners who have been given permission to welcome visitors onto their traditional land. Protocols for welcoming visitors to Country have been part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures for thousands of years. This welcome can take the form of a speech (sometimes in traditional language) or a performance (including smoking ceremony, singing and/or dancing). Whether spoken or performed, the aim of the ceremony is to acknowledge the traditional custodians and welcome the wider community. The Elder (or a representative) will give their blessing to the event, function, meeting or occasion. In response, the host (or key speaker) will acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities by paying respects to Elders (past, present and emerging).

An **Acknowledgement of Country** is where other people acknowledge and show respect for the traditional custodians of the land on which the event is taking place. Such an acknowledgement of Country can be used exclusively if an Elder or other appropriate member of the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander communities is not available to perform a Welcome to Country. Incorporating a welcome or acknowledgement protocol into official meetings and events recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Australians and custodians of their land. It promotes an awareness of the past and continuing connection that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have to the land, sea, sky and waterways. An Acknowledgement of Country can be performed by an

Indigenous or non-Indigenous person and is generally offered at the beginning of a meeting, speech or formal occasion.

Country

In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, the meaning of Country is more than just ownership or connection to land, as Professor Mick Dodson explains:

“When we talk about traditional ‘Country’...we mean something beyond the dictionary definition of the word. For Aboriginal Australians...we might mean homeland, or tribal or clan area and we might mean more than just a place on the map. For us, Country is a word for all the values, places, resources, stories and cultural obligations associated with that area and its features. It describes the entirety of our ancestral domains. While they may all no longer necessarily be the title-holders to land, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are still connected to the Country of their ancestors and most consider themselves the custodians or caretakers of their land.”

Sample Acknowledgement of Country

Hello, my name is (insert name) and I am from (suburb, job title – optional)

I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we gather today, the (insert First Nation) peoples. I would like to pay my respects to Elders past and present. I would like to acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people here today. The land we are on now, the land we live, work, breath, eat and sleep; always was and always will be Aboriginal Land.

Practical information

- Inviting an Elder or Community member to do a Welcome to Country or an Acknowledgment of Country should be planned well in advance and may incur a fee.
- It is always wise and appropriate to seek assistance if you are not sure what Country you are on. Local Reconciliation groups, Local Government and Local Aboriginal Land Councils are all good sources of information if you need assistance.
- For information about what Country you are meeting on and details to contact you can reach out to www.reconciliationnsw.org.au or New South Wales Local Aboriginal Land Councils on <http://alc.org.au>