

# Welcome to Country and Acknowledgment of Country

Recognising Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people as traditional custodians of the land is an important part of showing respect for the Indigenous peoples of Australia. There are a variety of ways to acknowledge Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander traditional custodians, which fall into two categories:

1. Welcome to Country
2. Acknowledgment of Country

In the context of Australia's Indigenous culture "Country" refers to a specific place within Australia and not Australia itself. Over 260 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander countries and language groups are represented across Australia. Country refers to "this" place, the traditional language group of the area where the event is held. The welcome follows a traditional protocol for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians where people entering another's Country (language area) would seek permission from the traditional owners and they would be welcomed to the area through ceremony. Today, non-Indigenous populations who are not originally from Australia are also welcomed to Country for the purpose of the events, and as a part of a continuing protocol which is maintained and observed throughout Indigenous communities across Australia.

Practices such as Welcome to Country and Acknowledgment of Country enable the wider community to share in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, and lead to better community relationships and understanding. Observing these practices connects participants with the country, and provides a welcoming atmosphere and spiritual presence to the place upon which people are meeting. It also reinforces the place of Indigenous perspectives within Queensland Government policies and procedures.

## 1. Welcome to Country

Welcome to Country gives custodians the opportunity to formally welcome people to their land from other parts of the country and other countries. This is done as a ceremony or an oral welcome from a custodial representative. A Welcome to Country changes depending on the type of function, the location, the agreements made and the protocols of everybody involved.

Welcome to Country is recommended for large public events (e.g. state-wide events and conferences). It may involve ceremonies of dance, smoke and/or song to bless the event and welcome participants. This larger Welcome to Country ceremony is negotiated with local Indigenous groups as part of the event. At times communities may also wish to ceremonially close the event to thank the participants and protect the land for future meetings.



Local communities may prefer an oral Welcome to Country performed by a traditional custodian. At the beginning of the event, the custodial representative gives a formal Welcome to Country. Again, the local custodial group may request a closing speech.

Events where Welcome to Country are particularly appropriate include:

- state-wide conferences
- conferences or large professional development events involving a wide cross-section of participants
- highly publicised events
- significant policy, report, project launches
- professional development and whole of government/organisation functions.

## 2. Acknowledgment of Country

Acknowledgment of Country usually occurs when traditional custodians are not available to provide an official Welcome to Country, or the scale of the function does not warrant a traditional welcome.

Senior personnel may also give an Acknowledgment of Country following Welcome to Country. An Acknowledgment of Country shows respect by acknowledging that the event is happening on traditional custodial land, thanks the custodians for allowing the event to take place, and sets a conciliatory tone for the event.

Acknowledgment of Country is a way that the wider community can show respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander protocol, and acknowledge the ongoing relationships between the traditional custodians and the spiritual and cultural practices of the local area. It is a significant and symbolic reconciliation gesture.

Most city and shire councils, government departments and many other organisations are adopting the practice of acknowledging the local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander traditional custodians at meetings, official events and ceremonies. Acknowledgment of Country is a matter of protocol at events involving external personnel, sector or community representatives.

The Queensland Government encourages managers, education officers, executives, committee chairs, community leaders and individuals to include relevant acknowledgments in speeches they make at public meetings and forums. See: <[www.reconciliation.qld.gov.au/message.html](http://www.reconciliation.qld.gov.au/message.html)>

### *Developing an Acknowledgment of Country*

An Acknowledgment of Country is both a personal and professional protocol. Developing an Acknowledgment of Country may take time. It should reflect a personal approach and not be seen as an organisational directive. The Dare to Lead coalition can provide further guidance on this through their website: <[www.daretolead.edu.au](http://www.daretolead.edu.au)>.



The following statement is used by Brian Giles-Browne in the work he does in New South Wales:

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of this land and pay our respects to the elders both past, present and future for they hold the memories, the traditions, the culture and hopes of Aboriginal Australia. We must always remember that under the concrete and asphalt this land is, was and always will be traditional Aboriginal land.

The following statement was used at the Dare to Lead national, state and territory launches. You are welcome to adapt it (e.g. using the name of the people instead of the generic “first people”, changing the last line so it refers to a particular project, agreement etc.):

Paying respect to the first peoples on whose land we are,  
Acknowledging the loss of lands, cultures and treasures,  
Knowing the consequences for people, communities and nations,  
Believing we can walk together to a better future,  
We meet today.

Other alternatives for use or adaptation are:

I would like to acknowledge the [language name/s if known] traditional custodians of the land upon which we meet and the important role that these custodians play in maintaining gathering places such as these for our collective use.

I would like to acknowledge the Indigenous peoples of Queensland [or other location e.g. Townsville, Roma, Brisbane] and particularly honour and thank the traditional custodians of the [language name/s if known] land upon which we meet. Thank you for providing access to this part of your country.

Our organisation affirms that Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people are the Indigenous peoples of Australia. Before we proceed with today's meeting, I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land upon which we meet and welcome you to this area.

Over time, individuals will develop their own preferred style and approach to Acknowledgment of Country, and this will change depending on the context and place of the event or meeting.

It is appropriate to give an Acknowledgment of Country at the start of a meeting or daily proceedings. Often individuals involved in speaking throughout a day or within meetings will also provide a personal Acknowledgment of Country, and this is entirely appropriate.

## Community engagement in observing protocols

Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people from the wider community can provide advice on when to use Welcome to Country ceremonies, Acknowledgment of Country and other Indigenous protocols in events or functions.

It is important to note that the meaning of ceremonies and practices differ from place to place. Therefore it is very important to work together to decide on when and where ceremonies and acknowledgments should take place, the



format of the ceremony, who could and should be involved and an appropriate level of remuneration.

The process will not always be easy.

Observing Aboriginal protocols and Torres Strait Islander protocols includes allowing time for traditional decision making and discussion. Welcome to County must be given by an appropriate person or delegated representative from the traditional Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander custodian's group.

As an effect of dispossession, in some parts of Queensland there are disputes about custodial ownership. People who have been dislocated from their land and have returned to an area may no longer be accepted as traditional custodians. These issues are the business of the Indigenous communities involved. In such a case, speakers, Indigenous community representatives or elders at an event, might acknowledge the traditional owners of the land without naming those people through their language or family name. Acknowledging country in this way will not cause offence where there is some potential or actual dispute around traditional owners.

**All links in this document were correct on 7 February 2008. If any links have broken, please advise [IndigenousPortal@qsa.qld.edu.au](mailto:IndigenousPortal@qsa.qld.edu.au)**