



Addressing Native American Issues

AS AN ALLY FOR TRUTH, SUPPORT, AND CHANGE



NATIVE HOPE



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INTRO

Revitalizing the Native American Narrative

What story do you have in your head about Native Americans? When was the last time you thought about the lives and experiences of the Native Americans around you?

Have you ever felt uncomfortably ignorant about the true history of Native Americans in the United States?

You're not alone. If you want to show up as an ally for the Native American population in North America or want to know more about a group of people routinely ignored, discriminated against, tokenized, and misunderstood, you've come to the right place.

At **Native Hope**, we are working hard to change the previously perpetuated story told about Native Americans.

In this resource, you will find the information, inspiration, and challenge needed to become more thoughtful, informed, and passionate about the true story of the first Americans. We hope you become more equipped with accurate knowledge to address and stand up for the injustices Native Americans face in all facets of their lives.

CHAPTER 1

Unveiling the Naiveté About Native Americans



A recent groundbreaking project, **“Reclaiming Native Truth,”** conducted a rigorous, 2-year study of public perceptions of Native Americans. The study examined social media evidence and personal conversations with political and business leaders involving close to 30 focus groups across 11 states.

This project, the first of its kind, exposed **widespread misunderstandings about Native Americans** across all sectors of society. This report conclusively demonstrates what Native Americans have expressed for years: the vast majority of Americans don’t think about Native American issues and have only a vague sense that the Native population is declining.

Even while most Americans may not think about Native American issues at all, the thoughts and perceptions they do have about Native history and life are incorrect.

According to the final report,



“Nearly half of Americans say that what they learned in schools about Native Americans was inaccurate; 72 percent say it is necessary to make significant changes to the school curriculum on Native American history and culture.”

[Learn More About True Native History](#)

CHAPTER 2

The Real Story Behind Common Misconceptions About Native Americans

We need a great effort to change the Native American narrative as a whole. By focusing more on the positive and allowing the truth of the Native story to stand out in its full dignity, resilience, and living relevance, we can reformulate basic assumptions and tackle the most common myths and misconceptions about Native American life.

For many people, vague ideas about Native Americans come from the inadequate or false history they learned in school and a lifetime of absorbing the stereotypical representations in books, movies, news media, and mainstream culture.

On closer examination, many of these myths are impossible, contradictory, or just plain wrong. Native allies should take the time to educate themselves about common misconceptions and encourage others to confront irrational or confused thinking about Native Americans through active conversation.

4 Common Misconceptions About Native Americans

1

“All Native Americans are alcoholics and addicts.”

This widespread stereotype is deeply damaging and paints a narrow picture of Native life. Many Native Americans avoid the consumption of alcohol entirely. In fact, data suggests Native Americans have both the highest rates

of complete abstinence and the highest rates of issues like binge drinking in comparison to other races.

Scientific and cultural studies have clearly shown that alcohol abuse among Native American populations is neither a genetic phenomenon nor a problem stemming from socialization. In fact, struggles with alcoholism and binge drinking are closely tied to high rates of other mental health issues — all of which may come in light of the intense legacy of historical trauma and generational pain that this population faces.

2

“Native Americans live off of government handouts” and “Native Americans are all rich from casinos.”

These contradictory ideas are both false. Native Americans are both tribal citizens and American citizens. As both tribal citizens and American citizens, Native Americans pay federal income taxes and all other state and local taxes if they do not live on a reservation. Native Americans do not receive government assistance for “being Native American”, and any additional funds paid to tribes or Native Americans come from legally binding treaty relationships or land agreements between the tribe and the United States government, where the groups exchanged land and resources for financial payments.

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Additionally, very few tribes own and operate casinos. According to a recent study from Reclaiming Native Truth, **“the 43 casinos that generate the majority of all tribal gaming revenue benefit just 5 percent of tribal citizens.”**

3 “Native Americans live on reservations, and there aren’t many left.”

The Native American population in North America is strong, young, and growing — and more than 80% of Native Americans live off reservations. Even if you don’t realize it, you likely know someone who is Native American or has Native American ancestry. Native Americans are not tucked away and slowly disappearing. They live and work as artists, doctors, lawyers, businesspeople, mothers, fathers, and everything in between.

Due to the legacy of historical trauma, some Native communities face immense challenges and high rates of suicide, addiction, and poverty. However, Native Americans, even those living on reservations, fully engage with modern society. Many are finding beautiful, rich ways to live their cultural traditions and values authentically in the midst of today’s modern age.

4 “Native Americans are all the same.”

The myth of the generic Native American person who speaks for and represents the vast diversity of Native cultures is common. However, the Native American population consists of over 574 federally recognized tribes. Each tribe has its own unique culture, traditions, and history. The Native experience since colonization is multi-faceted and incredibly distinct.

Colonization has impacted the environments in which Native individuals grow up. The experience of a Native American who grew up in an urban setting far from a localized Native community is very different but no less “real” than the experience of a Native American who grew up surrounded by a Native community on a reservation. Colonizers took many Native Americans from their families in the boarding school and adoption eras. Yet Native Americans carry their heritage with them as part of their story.



CHAPTER 3

Understanding and Addressing Controversial Native American Issues



Changing the narrative is essential. The real history and experience of Native Americans deserve attention. A deeper understanding of accurate history leads to compassion for current situations and issues. To help drive change, you can talk to family and friends about their individual perceptions of Native Americans and encourage them to understand where the perceptions originated. Encourage them to challenge these historical inaccuracies.

Another great place to start are the many political issues that affect Native American life today. In our current destructive political climate, all people need to work together to protect the rights of individuals, including Native Americans, and learn to speak up when people challenge these rights.

Issues Affecting Native Americans

Some of the biggest issues currently facing Native Americans need the support of allies to raise awareness. Understanding the issues facing Native Americans and their effects on the tribal and personal level is just the beginning. Together, we can provide a united message of hope and inspiration. This comes through gaining an understanding of the issues and how they affect Native Americans on a tribal and personal level and then through partnership to provide a united message.

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1 Land and Water Rights

Native Americans have a reverent and deep-rooted connection with specific places, land, and water. Historically, activity and exploitation have threatened and desecrated these sacred sites.

The cultural ties and land management of Native Americans are gaining **momentum through conservation agencies nationwide**. The slow progress of the government recognizing land has helped to curb environmental issues that affect non-Natives as well. In 1911, the U.S. government outlawed cultural burnings through the Weeks Act. This turned the focus of the US Forest Service to fire suppression and putting fires out instead of managing fires. However, with today's out-of-control forest fires being a problem throughout the country, many states are looking to Native Tribes for consultation on forest management through cultural burns. California, Florida, Oregon, and New Mexico are incorporating cultural burns to reduce forest fires and promote healthy forest growth. The **Department of Interior** has rewritten its policies and procedures to strengthen its relationships and consultations with the Tribes and their Nations.

2 Education

The state of education in Native American schools is appalling. In 2015, Politico ran an exposé titled **"How Washington Created Some of the Worst Schools in America."** When you read this article and others like it, the details are shocking, yet reporting like this is infrequent. This issue represents a humanitarian crisis unknown to many Americans.

Only 69.2% of Native students graduate high school, the lowest graduation rate among American students.

Many schools on reservations don't have sufficient funding and **lack access to Advanced Placement and college prep courses for their students**. Native American youth are also less likely to have family members who have attended college, and only 17% of Native American students continue their education after high school.

A study by the Education Committee of the National Caucus of Native American State Legislators reported that **Native American students performed two to three grade levels below their white peers in reading and math** and that Natives were two times more likely to drop out of school. Access to computers and home internet is also a challenge for Native American students. It makes doing research for school projects, the transition to online classes in times like the pandemic, and homeschooling and GED classes nearly impossible.

The low graduation rates and test scores of the Native population spell disaster for many Native children's hope for basic literacy. Efforts are underway to address this disparity, **with funds released in hopes of directly impacting this issue**.



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3 Healthcare

Native Americans have a life expectancy that is 5.5 years less than all other races represented in the United States. Poverty and geographic isolation make high-quality healthcare inaccessible for many Native American tribes. The available healthcare on reservations is often unreliable and typically not equipped to provide specialized care. This lack of access, and particularly a lack of access to mental health care, is a crippling problem that feeds into cycles of poor health, addiction, and suicide.

In times of global health crises, Native American communities are disproportionately affected. During the COVID-19 pandemic, **Natives were 3.5 times more likely to be hospitalized for their illnesses.** The **fatal toll that the virus had on Native communities** was also tragic, and the lack of proper funding and access to equipped healthcare only exacerbated the spread of the disease.

Due to the dramatic statistics, the South Dakota governing bodies announced the **Restoring Accountability in the Indian Health Service Act of 2022.** This Act addresses needed changes in the IHS health care system, including transparency, accountability, and providing adequate and reliable health care to Native Americans.



4 Religious and Cultural Discrimination

Native Americans have only had legal permission to observe their religious practices freely and openly, including repatriating sacred objects and protecting sacred lands, since 1978. However, comprehension of this law has not taken hold throughout the U.S. Incidents continue to arise where Native Americans are still fighting for appropriate recognition and a legal right to observe their religious practices and protect sacred lands. Americans should heed this serious First Amendment issue. As recently as 2019, Native students did not have the **right to wear eagle feathers at graduation,** a serious violation of their religious freedom.

Even with laws in place to guarantee religious freedom and the right to practice traditions, the **reality for many Native Americans** has been an **inconsistent and often unreceptive attitude toward their practices.** All too often, polytheistic cultures have had their sacred objects, sites of religious practice, and even sacred dates or times of the year altered to incorporate a monotheistic religious culture with a goal of transference and recruitment. The Black Hills of South Dakota, which houses the major tourist attraction Mount Rushmore, represents this fact.

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This giant granite monument intends to instill patriotism and freedom. However, prior to the construction of the four presidents, this granite bluff was a significant sacred site named **The Six Grandfathers** after a vision by the Lakota medicine man Nicolas Black Elk. The vision comprised the six sacred directions: west, east, north, south, above, and below. The directions represented kindness and love, full of years and wisdom, like human grandfathers. We should openly discuss the representation of everyone that this significant site holds and its history, meaning, and evolution.

5 Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women

Across the United States and Canada, Native women and girls are being taken or murdered at an unrelenting rate. **Murder is the third leading cause of death among native women**, and thousands of missing women do not have their cases properly reported or investigated. Movements to raise awareness for the lack of care and attention given to these cases have risen in recent years, but **the disappearance and violence against Native women remain a pressing issue**.

6 Human Trafficking

Native Americans are disproportionately targeted for sex trafficking, as traffickers seek out vulnerable individuals.

Vulnerability comes in many forms, such as age, poverty, homelessness, domestic and sexual violence, high rates of adverse childhood experiences, substance abuse, and lack of resources and support systems. Additionally, several of these **trafficking factors appear to correlate with Missing and Murdered Indigenous People (MMIP)**.

These factors put Native Americans at high risk as traffickers exploit these vulnerabilities. They recruit and groom individuals, offering them necessities such as food and shelter or providing for their substance addictions, as long as they do a few “favors” in return.



CHAPTER 4

Shifting the Language Used to Talk About the Native Experience



“For years, the lives and experiences of Indigenous peoples have often been introduced or described from a negative perspective. This may be well-intentioned because the narrative draws attention to the many challenges and incredible needs faced by Native peoples, but this narrative reinforces stereotypes and implies hopelessness. Native peoples are deeply hopeful and have an abundance of positive cultural knowledge. A better narrative reclaims the truth of our positive values and relationships.” — Cheryl Crazy Bull (Sicangu Lakota), as quoted by the Reclaiming Native Truth Project.

Native allies, journalists, politicians, and advocates must **embrace a paradigm shift regarding the Native story in America**. For too long, Native Americans, when discussed at all, have their story told exclusively in terms of their struggles and difficulties.

Yes, suicide, poverty, and addiction are serious problems within many Native communities. Still, many hopeful, positive, and inspiring stories exist about what it means to be Native American in this country.

It’s time to start focusing on strongly held Native values—like **commitment to family, reverence for the land and environment**, and **appreciation for unity and community**—to understand and communicate more truthfully about Native American life.

The frequent representation of Native Americans starts and ends with their struggles and difficulties. There is an instinct to start with hopelessness, addiction, and poverty as the foundation of the Native story. It is a natural occurrence when examining the lifestyle of others to compare to one’s own experiences and understanding of “normal.” However, we should neither judge lifestyles nor influence them through our own subjective lens because they exist in relative terms. This dehumanizes and robs the living Native tradition of its richness and modern relevance.

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How to Facilitate Strength

- **Talk frequently and freely about the modern-day life and presence of Native American people** in society, the cultural contributions of Native people, the resilience and values of the Native tradition, and how Native people have suffered and are suffering as a result of oppression and discrimination.
- **Research Native history, and never assume your education is complete.** The understanding of Native history is ever-evolving, and Native life is flourishing today – continue to learn from reliable, native-first sources.
- **Raise awareness among friends and family.** But don't do it exclusively by sharing shocking statistics and facts about the needs and challenges facing many Native communities today without incorporating factual history and understanding the hardships experienced.
- **Allow Natives to speak the truth for themselves.** Ask questions related to experiences and emotions related to events and issues. Society as a whole can learn from the experiences of others through this and develop compassion that forms allies.



CHAPTER 5

How to be an Ally for Change



- **Change the Language.** This is the crucial first step for any Native ally. Think hard about how you think and talk about Native Americans. Re-frame thoughts and words to start from the positive truths about Native life, culture, values, and contributions, and discuss challenges only from this perspective. Share the positive and interesting things learned about the Native culture and experience with a friend, neighbor, or family member. Seek out, support, and share stories of hope.
- **Learn the True History.** No matter where you live in this country, there is a wealth of Native history in the landscape around. Learn your area's true history, the Native community that existed there before colonization, and the communities that continue to live there. Visit historical sites, find resources at your local library, talk to a local historian, and find Native Americans who are indigenous to the local regions. This is the best and only way to combat the falsities and half-truths that most people absorb during their early years of education about American history and Native Americans.

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- **A Call to Acknowledge the Land.** Acknowledgment is a simple, powerful way of showing respect and a step toward correcting the stories and practices that have previously erased Indigenous people's history and culture and move toward inviting and honoring the truth.

Every community owes its existence and vitality to generations from around the world who contributed their hopes, dreams, and energy to making the history that led to this moment. Some people groups experienced slavery and came to America against their will. Others chose to leave their distant homes, hoping for a better life, and some have lived on this land for countless centuries.

Truth and acknowledgment are critical to building mutual respect and connection across all barriers of heritage and difference. This effort begins with an acknowledgement that has been unspoken, by honoring the truth. Standing on American land is standing on the ancestral lands of Native Americans who lost this land, which affords everyone the ability to live here today. Part of the acknowledgment is paying respect to Native American elders, past and present, along with taking the time to consider the many legacies of violence, displacement, migration, and settlement and joining in uncovering such truths.

- **Challenge Perceptions.** Begin to challenge and correct the discrimination, racism, and misinformation seen all around. Demand better news coverage from mainstream journalists, support Native artists and businesses, and speak up when you hear misconceptions or hateful speech.
- **Support Advocacy Groups.** Look for organizations supporting Native well-being and changing the national conversation about what it means to be Native American and support them with time and money or by sharing their work within the community.
- **Share Resources for Change within Communities.** This is one of the most important contributions. The work of undoing racism and discrimination starts with a willingness to participate, to change one's own heart and mind, and to share the truth with courage and enthusiasm.

CHAPTER 6

How Conversation and Representation Create Change



If Natives, non-Native allies, nonprofits, corporations, politicians, journalists, research organizations, government agencies, and every other facet of society could shift the conversation about the Native American story toward the truth, the results would be transformative.

- **Native Children** would be able to grow up seeing themselves and their culture accurately, respectfully, and frequently represented in mainstream media.
- **Politicians** would learn the truth about Native American life both on and off reservations and would have accountability for their voting decisions on critical political issues.
- **Native leaders, artists, and communities** would find outlets eager to share and promote both the beautiful and successful stories and the difficult experiences of Native life.
- **Non-Natives** can restore dignity and humanity to people ignored, silenced, and oppressed for many generations.

We all can create a powerful atmosphere of support to help a previously invisible people emerge onto the national scene with full dignity.

CHAPTER 7 —

Connect with Native Hope



Here at Native Hope, we believe in the power of storytelling to dismantle barriers, bring healing, and inspire hope for Native people. Through [our fellowships](#), [our blog](#), and [our work in Native communities](#), we hope to be a force for hope, inspiration, and healing for Natives around the world.

We hope this resource has helped you consider how you can contribute to the mission of dignity and healing for Native people as an ally.

For more information, check out our other resources and to learn how to get involved.

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