Applying the Jemez Principles for Democratic Organizing in Wildlands Protection:
Sierra Club Wildlands and Wilderness Grassroots Network Team’s
Guidance for Collaborating with Native American People
March 7, 2021

The purpose of this update is to incorporate the Jemez Principles into the Sierra Club Wilderness Advisory Workbook. The goal is to encourage chapters and groups to elevate and incorporate Native American and Tribal voices into the development of proposals, implementation of campaigns, and content of legislation for wilderness and wildlands. Native Americans have a unique historic and contemporary relationship with many of the lands eligible for wilderness designation.

Tribes and Native peoples are under no obligation to be in partnership with Sierra Club. Any relationship that is developed should be mutual and reflect a desire by both parties to work together. White groups pursue Tribal nations and groups at high rates. Respect the time of Native nations and Tribal groups. Be mindful that for every request or invitation offered to Tribes a dozen other invitations sit in their inboxes from other predominantly white groups.

The Jemez Principles for Democratic Organizing were developed by and for participants from different cultures, politics, and organizations. This Wildlands Advisory focuses on Native American people in the mainland United States. We acknowledge that this is not a comprehensive document and does not specifically include Indigenous peoples of Hispanic or Pacific Islander descent.

It is critical that Sierra Club staff and volunteers embrace these principles if community partnerships are to be mutually supportive. Everyone in the organization is charged with engaging in strategic partnerships with intentionality and integrity.

To prepare this update the Equity sub-team of the Wildlands and Wilderness Team compiled the experiences of Sierra Club staff and volunteers, resources of the Sierra Club Equity Department, and other relevant materials. Links to key sources are given at the end.

#1 Be Inclusive

- **First, Offer Friendship:** To be inclusive regarding Sierra Club association with Native peoples it is beneficial to become trusted friends. This friendship is important before any discussions of matters of consequence, environmental or otherwise, be considered. It is also important to understand that the conservation movement has engaged in activities harmful to the interests of Native people. This has extended to elements within the Sierra Club as well.
- **Incorporate Input from the Frontlines:** For the environmental movement to remain relevant and effective it must increase and improve its practice of inclusivity and partnership. This is especially true in its relations with the Native nations. This means
prioritizing the voices, views, and needs of those most marginalized by dominant culture, including Native peoples. Invite speakers and input in accordance with the protocols of their respective communities; pay for people’s time when appropriate. Recognize that communities living on the frontlines are uniquely informed, authentic in their place-based, historical knowledge of their ecosystems, and further advanced in their analyses of the human-made systems that affect them and the health of their ecosystems.

- **Honor the Unique Nature of Each Native Culture:** There are more than 500 distinct Tribal nations within the borders of the United States, each with a unique culture, history, and identity. In order to build true partnerships, Sierra Club entities must consider these distinct identities and strive always to respect cultural sensitivities. There are general rules to observe when engaging with Native nations, but it is especially important to be attentive to the specific lived experience of each Tribal nation and individual. Non-Natives have to understand the economic realities faced by Tribal nations, many of which have historic dependence on extraction industries.

- **Understand that Inclusivity Goes Both Ways:** In the case of Bears Ears, Sierra Club followed the lead of the Native peoples who gathered to discuss the possibility of asking for a new National Monument. Being inclusive was a mutual action. Strong Tribal leaders shaped their campaign and the Sierra Club supported their campaign. The Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition solicited letters of support to grow their campaign nationally, and the Sierra Club wrote such a letter. The Sierra Club is not always ‘in the driver’s seat’ for local campaigns. Staff and volunteers take ‘back seat’ roles and make sure those in the community most impacted by the work are the spokespeople.

- **Don’t Give Up:** In the words of a member of the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition, “There’s a reason why they’re called different Band names, different Tribes.” “They’re unique. They’re unique in how they perceive stuff, they’re unique in how they open up and discuss things.” Native Americans are not always forthcoming in explaining their viewpoint to non-Natives, but non-Natives should still ask for input from Native Americans. “Don’t give up if you want to engage us, because one of the techniques we use a lot is to see how much you will try. And there’s a reason. Because we need to see if you’re sincere. We don’t know if they’re pot hunters, we don’t know if they’re somebody trying to get rich. We’re waiting to see, are you sincere, are you honest.” Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition provides “an actual conduit for people to engage us as Tribes.” However, it is important to respect “no” as an answer if Tribes don’t want to work with Sierra Club. No response is also a response.

### #2 Emphasis on Bottom-Up Organizing

- **Native Peoples’ Deep and Lasting Relationship with Ancestral Lands:** Their knowledge of the plants and animals they share the land with can be remarkable from non-Natives’ perspective. Native peoples’ relationship extends to cultural, religious, spiritual, historical, and economic uses of the land. Many cultural and archaeological sites may not be evident to non-Native visitors. Burial sites and temporary living sites are difficult to see or recognize. Tribes look to their land and natural resources to provide and support essential
elements of Native life and culture—from subsistence hunting, fishing, and gathering, to sources of economic development and Tribal sacred places.

- **Traditional Knowledge:** Indigenous knowledge has developed from understanding and documenting the processes in nature. Observing that animals did not eat certain plants and assuming that this was because they were toxic, communities took extracts and tested them for a range of uses. Because plants differ across ecological zones, each region has developed products and uses based on their regional flora.

- **Working Respectfully and Effectively with Tribal Nations:** 1) Acknowledge and respect Tribal sovereignty, 2) Understand that historically the federal government did not recognize all Tribes and engaged in disbanding or removing recognition for many Tribes through the middle of the last century—removing recognition continues to this day, it’s not over, 3) Recognize that all Native American Tribes represent distinct and independent governmental entities with specific beliefs, traditions and unique connections to lands that are their ancestral homelands, 4) Communicate and consult with Native American Tribes during the initial phase of decision-making processes that may affect Tribal lands, people, or cultural resources, 5) Recognize and respect the cultural resources of Native American Tribes, whether or not the cultural resources are located on Tribal lands, 6) Acknowledge the need for confidentiality regarding places, land, people, and cultural resources with traditional Tribal cultural significance, 7) Consider the potential impact of the Sierra Club’s activities or programs on Tribal lands and cultural resources, 8) Encourage collaborative efforts between Native American Tribes and federal, state, and local government entities to resolve issues of mutual concern. [modified from California Environmental Protection Agency Policy on Consultation with California Native American Tribes]

- **Examples of Successful Partnerships:**
  - **Best Practices by Our Wild America (OWA):** The OWA team has significantly shifted their practices and cultures to better embody their shared commitment to equity, inclusion, and justice. This has led to a new way of working where OWA selects priorities for campaigns and plans the execution of work hand in hand with Native frontline community partners. This has manifested itself in deep, working partnerships in each priority campaign location—from leaders of the Gwich’in Nation joining in Arctic Campaign planning meetings opposing oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, to Navajo leaders working to co-draft campaign plans to protect the Greater Chaco Landscape, and to Tribal partners collaborating on lawsuits to protect Bears Ears National Monument, defeat the Line 3 tar sands pipeline, and successfully block the delisting of the grizzly bear.
  
  - **A Successful Partnership in the Pacific Northwest:** Relationships have been built over the past five years between the Lummi Nation and Sierra Club organizers in the Pacific Northwest. The Lummi Nation have shown moral leadership in standing up for the natural world: from stopping coal exports at Cherry Point, to showing solidarity with Tribes fighting environmental degradation across the Americas, to protecting the Southern Resident orca and the Salish Sea. The Lummi Nation has never shied away from bold, necessary action.
○ Wilderness and Wildlands Examples: In Nevada, Sierra Club staff and volunteers developed relationships with the Moapa Band of Paiutes and other groups while working on the campaign to make Gold Butte a national monument, and currently are working with the Las Vegas Band of Paiutes and other Native groups in the coalition campaigns to stop military expansion into the Desert and Stillwater National Wildlife Refuges.

○ Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition: Navajo, Hopi, Ute Mountain Utes, Uintah and Ouray Utes, and Zuni organized themselves into the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition (BEITC). They were also the most effective activists at gathering Native American support from across the country. The Sierra Club and other conservation organizations wrote letters of support for the BEITC and agreed to follow their lead in pursuing a monument. The Sierra Club continued to follow their lead when it came time to challenge the legality of the actions of President Trump to reduce the monument and gut provisions of the original proclamation. The Sierra Club formed part of a loose coalition of organizations that gathered over a million comments to the BLM supporting the Bears Ears NM as proclaimed by President Obama.

● A Missed Opportunity and Lessons Learned: The Sierra Club Black Hills Group squandered a great opportunity to work with the Oglala Lakota Sioux on the 2009-2011 campaign to designate wilderness adjacent to the Pine Ridge Reservation on the Buffalo Gap National Grasslands in southwestern South Dakota. The Black Hills Group recognized that the Lakota should be approached to sign on as supporters of Wilderness designation—the Tribe was recognized by the USFS as representing Native American stakeholders. However, no one in the Group knew how to make cold contacts, citing stereotypes, cultural ignorance, and fear of making mistakes and offending the Tribe. Good community organizing techniques should have been followed by attempting to make the contacts and lay out their vision and proposal. The Group would have profited by learning about the Native land ethic and Lakota culture. The Group could have held events with the Lakota and invited them to Steering Committee meetings. Eventually, other organizers entered the campaign and successfully contacted the Tribal Parks & Recreation Authority (OSPRA), resulting in OSPRA staff attending a significant Congressional staff tour down into the Grasslands, with Sierra Club unaware. Before the bill was introduced, OSPRA managers secured the Oglala Sioux Tribal Council’s formal resolution supporting Wilderness designation. Black Hills Group members attended the Council meeting but were not part of the presentation. They gained no lasting memory of how to make contacts in the Lakota community.

#3 Let People Speak for Themselves

● Learn to Listen and Ask Questions: Native Americans have a strong voice. However, in small informal groups it is too easy to speak as an ‘expert’ when Native Americans can speak for themselves. Learning to be silent, ask questions, and listen with humility are important skills in many situations. Patience is also requisite. Where European Americans have dominated politics and economics to the detriment of others these skills are particularly important.
• **Amplify the Voices of Native Peoples:** Do not simply regurgitate information. It is important to make Indigenous peoples’ voices heard in debates and policies on biodiversity, ecosystems, and public lands protection. Always be careful not to speak for the Tribes and share their materials accurately.

• **Respect Tribal Governance:** Recognized leaders and spokespeople should be sought out—respect the Tribes’ governance structures and traditions. Like all groups of people, they have strong leaders who speak passionately and eloquently. Work with Tribal leaders to identify knowledgeable individuals in the community, such as elders, and how to consult with them (consider providing gifts when seeking guidance or knowledge from elders or community members). Coordinate with multiple Tribal contacts and involve them early on. This could include the Tribal council, Tribal environmental and natural resources staff, and Tribal Historic Preservation Office. As with any nation, differences of opinion exist within Tribal nations, and individual members should not be taken as speaking for everyone within their communities, unless they are recognized leaders.

• **Economics May Cause Tribal Dissent:** Do not expect unanimity among members of a Tribe or Native American nation. It may take them some time to come to a consensus, if they can. Different Tribal groups, businesses, leaders, and individuals may have very different perspectives and positions on any given issue—especially grazing, herding, mining, drilling, and other sources of jobs and income. Economic concerns may override all others where people have been forced into extreme poverty.

• **Give Communication Assistance on Tribal Terms:** Let Tribal allies speak for themselves and in their own voices without a Sierra Club spin. Stretch the boundaries of what the Sierra Club would typically be comfortable with and elevate Tribal voices in saying things from their perspective. Work with Tribal leaders on Sierra Club materials, elevate their voices using the platforms that are likely to get the biggest audience in mainstream media. Assist behind the scenes drafting press releases and connecting to media contacts or deferring Sierra press engagement so the Tribal allies go first and are more likely to get picked up. Serve as a bridge to help Tribal allies’ voices be most resonant in a world in which power is still occupied by white structures, with the long term aim to shift power.

• **Native Peoples’ View of Their Lands and History:** The Native American perspective on the land is different from the non-Native viewpoint, and land management agencies have, until recently, failed to solicit Tribal input on how areas should be managed and what aspects are important to Tribal people. Native people want to give a Tribal perspective on their history. Tribes have a different approach to history and the past than non-Natives. Understanding Tribal ways of the past requires consideration of the whole landscape, spiritual aspects, physical aspects, aesthetics, and sounds. They approach it comprehensively and holistically. Tribal members view the land as their home, former home, burial ground, or a place to gather certain things for their prosperity and culture. For nomadic Tribes, the whole landscape matters, not just where structures and artifacts are found. Natives’ perspective on archaeology is very different from non-Natives’; they view the area in the context of landscapes and not just an archeological site. Tribe members are still buried on the land even though the Tribe was relocated. There are taboos—they don’t mess with things that are gone. Recognize that many areas are sacred to Tribes and they do not go there.
#4 Work Together in Solidarity and Mutuality

- **Be Dependable:** Because of the Sierra Club’s history, it has a responsibility to work towards a level of trust that permits solidarity and mutuality. It is unrealistic to think the Sierra Club can step into any situation with Native Americans and expect instantaneous trust. When Club and Tribal allies share a goal to protect wildlands, build values on how you do the work. As Sierra Club members, be honest about what you can promise, say, or do without verifying such actions through the organizational decision-making processes. Set a realistic time frame for your ability to respond or act upon requests from Tribal allies. When Tribal allies ask non-Natives to show up, show up, including putting in monetary resources if necessary. Use Club resources to identify strategic opportunities for the Tribal allies to engage.

- **Work at the Speed of Trust:** Strategy and relationships evolve over time; rushing can hurt the relationship. Take time to be authentic, with ongoing conversations, being mutually supportive, and doing planned work together. Powerful partnerships don’t just happen by accident. It takes years of building trust and working together to forge deep and lasting partnerships that bring big wins for the environment and communities. Be cognizant of when to ask things of allies and when the relationship is not quite there and err on the side of thinking it’s not there yet.

- **Assist with General Tribal Needs:** Working to preserve wildlands can mean helping on a variety of issues important to the Tribes, even if it’s not a central Sierra Club priority. Tribal allies may have issues that aren’t immediately seen or aren’t being directly worked on in the campaign. As good partners building relationships and trust, add capacity and support on those issues, where possible. Examples are supporting programs that support education, health systems, humanitarian relief, etc.

- **Promote Native Culture in Non-Native Communities:** One approach to develop friendship and trust, is to bring the Native community to non-Native communities initially through the arts and history of a given Nation or Tribe. Many Tribal individuals are, in fact, artists, writers, musicians, dancers, and storytellers. By bringing individuals and groups to a non-Native community in a public format, non-Natives can build a larger understanding of Native culture and appreciation in the quest for developing friendship and trust so that everyone might be comfortable in pursuing issues of concern to all.

- **Be Aware of Differing Perceptions of Wilderness:** Recognize that some Native Americans oppose designating new wilderness, fearing it could further diminish their access to economic opportunities or traditional practices such as plant and food gathering, cultural burning, and sacred ceremonies. The language of the Wilderness Act may be perceived as exclusionary. Defining wilderness as places where “the imprint of man’s work [is] substantially unnoticeable” may feel like part of the attempted genocide and erasure that Native people have experienced. Although the Wilderness Act is concerned with trampling and domination of the land conducted by non-Native people, remember that all lands, including designated wilderness, were people’s homelands before European colonization. The trampling and domination of land by the United States and its predecessors went hand-in-
hand with the removal of the ancestors of today’s Native people. Wilderness and wildlands protections, developed collaboratively, may be a means of addressing historic injustices. Be sensitive to Native Americans’ lived experience and do not ignore their concerns.

#5 Build Just Relationships Among Ourselves

- **Consider Others’ Perspective:** Understand Tribal concerns and recognize the Sierra Club role as an outsider. Develop a continual practice of actively allying with each other, based on real relationships and open communication. As white people ask what support looks like for people of color; as men, ask what support looks like for women; as able-bodied people, ask what support looks like disabled people, etc.

- **Be Accountable to Partners:** Relationships should extend beyond the current agenda and campaign goals. Set agreements and practices with internal and external partners that will lead to mutual accountability. Mutually agree on time and labor contributions of partners. Provide resources without strings for people to do work that they want to do, who are accountable to the community they are in.

- **Do Not Appropriate:** Cultural appropriation is the adoption or use of elements of one culture by members of a different culture. Recognize that Native peoples’ culture is not your own. Don’t speak the Native language unless you are specifically taught and asked to do so. Don’t share Tribal stories unless invited to do so.

- **Don’t Tokenize Native People:** Tribal partners should represent their community and not be tokenized. Don’t offer a leadership position to someone until you get to know them as a person. Find out what their values, interests, and skills are, what they do for a living, and what are their other time commitments. Show up for Tribal events and learn about them, not just for recruitment, but to get to know them as individuals, learn their names, and build trust.

- **Avoid Microaggressions:** Be mindful of microaggressions or unknowingly racist comments, such as being surprised that a Tribal member is articulate, expecting them to be an expert on Native American history, or assuming that everyone on a reservation is on food stamps. If Native people are invited to a meeting, give them enough time to explain cultural understanding.

- **Use Respectful and Thoughtful Language:** In writing, capitalize the words Tribe, Tribal, Native, and Indigenous. “Native” should always be qualified by “people” or “peoples.” When referring to a Tribal nation, refer specifically to the nation (Dine, Cheyenne, Nooksack, etc.). Though many Tribal peoples may use “Indian” to refer to themselves, always use a more formal, respectful term like “Tribal or Native people.” If someone wishes to be identified as “Indian,” refer to them as “self-identified.” Use “Tribal” for Native people in the U.S. only, “First Nation” in Canada (not including the Inuit and Metis), and “Indigenous” worldwide. Many slang terms that are used in a particular community are welcome within that community, but not appropriate for use by people who are not members of that community (such as “rez”).
Develop Internal Trust First: Sierra Club entities need to have solid relationships within their organizations and with movement partners so that everyone can trust each other. Others probably can detect a lack of internal trust if it exists.

#6 Commitment to Self-Transformation

- **Take Care of Yourself:** Self-transformation means admitting a new set of people and activities into an already committed life. The struggle is balancing current activities with new commitments of time and actions. Be open to learning and growing but keep your own values and sense of self.

- **Research Regional History:** Research the history of the area, especially as relates to the local Tribes and their land, preferably written by local Tribe members. Identify and meet with Tribal Historic Preservation Officers and discuss the history of the local community. Each Tribe is culturally diverse, with their own language, culture, geographic areas or land base, and their own name.

- **Get to Know the Tribal Culture and Issues:** Learn about the Tribal communities, the top concerns, issues, opinion leaders, and power dynamics, and avoid making assumptions. Learn how to work with communities in respectful and non-offensive ways. Recognize cultural differences; not all Tribes are politically progressive (gender roles, elders, food), understand economic realities and possible historic dependence on extraction industries, and respect Tribal sovereignty.

- **Understand Sovereignty and Treaty Rights:** Tribes are sovereign nations, and Tribal sovereignty reflects a nation’s ability to self-determine, which is a fundamental right. Native American Tribes are recognized in federal law as possessing self-determination over their members and their territory. Sovereignty means that Tribes have the power to make and enforce laws, and to establish courts and other forums for resolution of disputes. Tribal treaties take precedence over any conflicting state law. This is often misunderstood, and we should do our part to spread this important message. Many Tribes have never been federally-recognized or have had recognition revoked, and this lack of recognition continues today. The legal process to gain recognition is often unaffordable.

- **Acknowledge Past Injustices:** Just like the United States, the Sierra Club has a complex history. Understand how past Sierra Club interactions and/or mis-steps have affected Tribal nations. The ‘preserved’ land was historically Tribal homelands, and many Native people were forcibly removed from Tribal lands that became national parks. Public ownership language may be difficult for many Native people. Acknowledge that specific Native peoples were the original stewards of lands that Chapters and Groups wish to protect.

- **Give a Land Acknowledgement at Meetings:** A land acknowledgement is a recognition of the original inhabitants of an area, designed to show respect for Native peoples and to surface often-suppressed colonial history of our country. It is a way of recognizing that Native societies spanned the entire continent when European colonists arrived in the 1400s, and that we now reside on occupied and often stolen Native territories. Giving land acknowledgements challenges our teams to ensure that Indigenous communities and
leaders have agency in making decisions about resource allocation and environmental protection efforts.

Sources

3 Things to Keep Me from Rolling My Eyes at Your White Privilege

CALEPA Policy on Consultation with California

Equity Language Guide (especially pp. 16-19 Tribal Sovereignty and Public Lands)

Jemez Principles for Democratic Organizing

Native American Allyship Resources

Native Land Map

Native Voices Heard on Bears Ears

Pivoting Principled Practice Growing 4 Change

Sierra Club: Growing for Change Presentation

Sierra Club Our Wild America Campaign Land Acknowledgement

Working with Tribal Nations