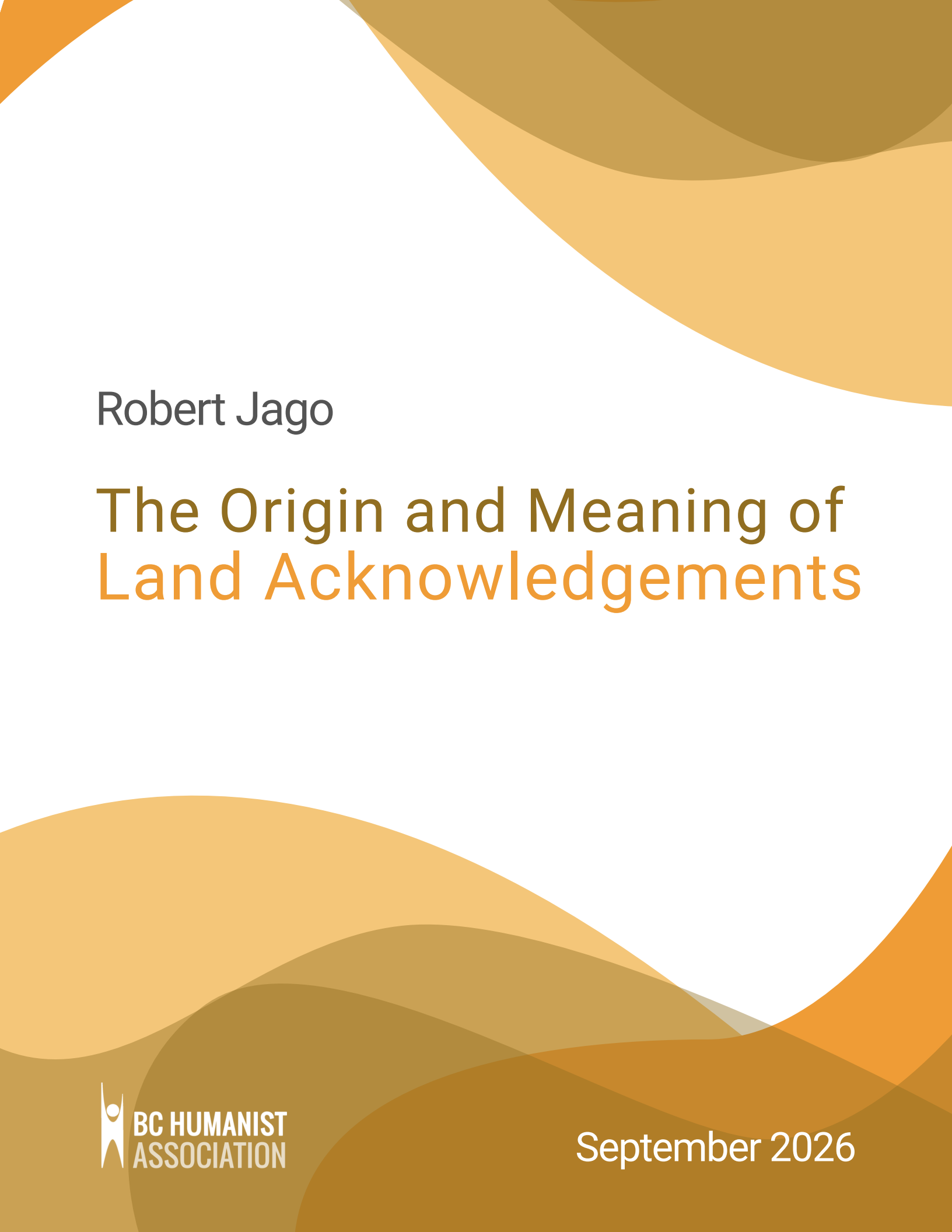




Robert Jago

The Origin and Meaning of Land Acknowledgements

THE ORIGIN AND MEANING OF LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Land Acknowledgements are now standard practice at public and private events in Canada and Australia, and the custom has spread to the United States.¹ However, little has been written about their origins, and what has been said is unfortunately incorrect, possibly aiding in their mis-appropriation and the subsequent backlash against them.

This paper makes three core arguments: First, current reporting on land acknowledgements claims that they originated in Australia² and then spread to North America. This is not correct. Land acknowledgements in North America evolved from Indigenous (Coast Salish) practices in Washington State and British Columbia. They began their transition to their current form with the 1989 Paddle to Seattle event (held as part of Washington State's centennial).³ Over several years they transformed from an Indigenous protocol observed when entering reserve lands⁴ into a statement performed at university events, often in the absence of Indigenous people themselves. Second, these acknowledgements derive from the ch'ech'itsul (pronounced cha-cheet-zul) code—a pre-contact Coast Salish legal framework governing property relations and resource access.⁵ Third, subsequent modifications introducing mentions of “stolen land,”⁶ guilt, and reconciliation represent cultural mis-appropriation that transforms law into therapy. These innovations fundamentally change the meaning of land acknowledgements.

Methodology: This analysis draws on archival materials and media reports; interviews with Indigenous knowledge keepers, leaders, and scholars; published oral histories; and academic literature on Coast Salish law. Coast Salish legal principles are transmitted through practice and oral tradition rather than written statute, making oral testimony a primary source. Claims about pre-contact understanding rest on documented oral histories. This paper focuses specifically on Coast Salish origins—I do not claim that these are the only land acknowledgements, but that this is the primary transmission path for current North American practice.

This paper examines how land acknowledgements came about in North America, offers a theory about why they were misappropriated, and provides recommendations on how to restore the inclusive meaning of them.

¹ Schemmel, A. (2025). Watch: DNC opens Summer meeting with land acknowledgment, claims that US suppresses indigenous history. FOX News Channel. <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/watch-dnc-opens-summer-meeting-land-acknowledgment-claims-us-suppresses-indigenous-history>

² DuVal, K. (2025). Enough With the Land Acknowledgments. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/05/opinion/indigenous-people-land-acknowledgments.html>

³ Museum of History & Industry. (2024). “Paddle to Seattle 1989” brochure. Collections and Research. <https://mohai.org/collections-and-research/search/item/2024.55/-%23.2/>

⁴ In Canada these lands are called reserves; in the United States, reservations. For consistency, this paper uses ‘reserve’ to refer to both.

⁵ Jago, R. (2025). The Cowichan Decision and Coast Salish Law. Robert Jago's Substack. <https://rjago.substack.com/p/the-cowichan-decision-and-coast-salish>

⁶ A collection of terrible land acknowledgements can be found here: Cyca, M. [michellecyca] (2022). what's the worst land acknowledgement you've ever seen? [Tweet]. <https://web.archive.org/web/20220806193536/https://twitter.com/michellecyca/status/1525198115304636416>

THE CURRENT UNDERSTANDING

The most widely shared account of the origin of land acknowledgements traces their creation to a series of events that took place in Australia between the 1970s and 1990s, and specifically to the work of several different Bundjalung First Nation artists⁷. Before contact with Europeans, Australia's Indigenous peoples used numerous "highly structured"⁸ forms of ceremonies for encountering newcomers – these included ceremonies where visitors would ritually share bodily scents for instance. In the 1970s these concepts were loosely adapted for relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.⁹

In 1973, at the Aquarius Music Festival¹⁰, the first Welcome to Country Ceremony was performed by Dicke Donnelly¹¹ and Lyle Roberts of the Bundjalung people. It was a novel ceremony, done to open the nature-focused music festival (referred to as the 'Australian Woodstock'). The Welcome ceremony was created as a response to criticism after complaints that the festival was being organized on an important site to Indigenous people.

The Sydney Morning Herald described the first Welcome to Country Ceremony:

*up to 100 white people including Leila Wedd and Al Oshlack, and a group of Indigenous people, were hiding in the scrub near a big campsite clearing, watching and waiting. "We stood there as the sun set," Wedd said. "Uncle Lyle's voice was rising [back at the main campsite]. We began to cry. The sound of clap sticks reached us, or perhaps the women clapping in the lap. And the rhythms built and built and this marvellous calling out."*¹²

Following the 'calling out', Lyle Roberts brought the non-Indigenous people to sit next to him, and he formally welcomed them and gave them a short history of his people and the region.¹³

⁷ This account is set out in detail below. See also: Tan, M. (2016). Ernie Dingo and Richard Walley on the 40th year of their welcome to country. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/feb/23/ernie-dingo-and-richard-walley-on-the-40th-year-of-their-welcome-to-country> and Roberts, R. (n.d.). Bundjalung clans & Welcome to country. Screenworks. <https://screenworks.com.au/production/bundjalung-clans-welcome-to-country/>

⁸ Merlan, F. (2014). Recent Rituals of Indigenous Recognition in Australia: Welcome to Country. <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/server/api/core/bitstreams/e8d6948e-30d4-4013-a8d3-eea7e621abc5/content>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Gilmore, H. (2023). How a 50-year-old hippie festival sparked the welcome to country phenomenon. The Sydney Morning Herald. <https://www.smh.com.au/national/how-a-50-year-old-hippy-festival-sparked-the-welcome-to-country-phenomenon-20230508-p5d6q4.html>

¹¹ Scantlebury, A. (2023). Black Fellas and Rainbow Fellas: Convergence of Cultures at the Aquarius Arts and Lifestyle Festival, Nimbin, 1973. M/C Journal, 17(6). <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.923> (Original work published October 13, 2014).

¹² Supra, Gilmore (2023).

¹³ Ibid.

The term 'Welcome to Country' was given to the ceremony by Rhonda Roberts¹⁴, who in the 1990s was also involved in creating the alternative version: the 'Acknowledgement of Country'. The former was to be performed by an Indigenous person, the latter by a non-Indigenous person if an Indigenous person was not available.

The standard Australian Acknowledgement of Country—the equivalent of a Land Acknowledgement—uses this formation:

*I'd like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today, the (people) of the (nation) and pay my respects to elders past and present.*¹⁵

Note, that this differs significantly from Land Acknowledgements in Canada, in that it includes references to elders, and does not identify and situate the speaker.

While that may adequately explain the situation in the antipodes, the timeline and practice does not match what we see in Canada.

The first Australian Welcome to Country took place in 1973.¹⁶ As we will see below, the Canadian equivalents – Indigenous ceremonial welcomes can be seen in news coverage as far back as the 1920s. The first Australian Acknowledgements of Country appeared in the 1990s, while the Canadian and American equivalent began at an event in 1989.¹⁷

All of this points to a convergent evolution of practice, rather than to the Australian origin cited by online information sources like Wikipedia.¹⁸ What we see in Australia is unique to Australia, and what we see in North America began elsewhere, specifically at a 1989 event called the 'Paddle to Seattle' in Coast Salish territory in British Columbia and Washington State.

¹⁴ SBS Australia [@sbsaustralia]. (2025) Welcome to Country is more than a ceremony – it's an ancient protocol of respect, connection, and acknowledgment [video]. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/reel/1845478872885963>

¹⁵ Acknowledgement of country and welcome to country – reconciliation Australia. Reconciliation Australia. (2025). <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/reconciliation/acknowledgement-of-country-and-welcome-to-country/>

¹⁶ Staines, J. (2026). The truth about welcome to country: What Anzac Day 2026 revealed about. Koori Curriculum. <https://kooricurriculum.com/blogs/news/the-truth-about-welcome-to-country-what-anzac-day-2026-revealed-about-us>

¹⁷ Noisecat, J. B. (2025). The Tribal Canoe Journey, an Odyssey to reclaim tradition and territory | Canadian Geographic. Canadian Geographic. <https://canadiangeographic.ca/articles/the-tribal-canoe-journey-an-odyssey-to-reclaim-tradition-and-territory/> and see "The 1989 Paddle to Seattle," below.

¹⁸ Land acknowledgement. Wikipedia. (2026). https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Land_acknowledgement

THE 1989 PADDLE TO SEATTLE

Before contact with Europeans, what is now called the Salish Sea was a busy route for trade, and marine harvesting—prowled by thousands of canoes of all the different coastal peoples. In winter, armadas of canoes would travel from one village to the next for the winter ceremonies that bound Coast Salish people together.¹⁹

That ocean-going culture fell dormant in the early 20th century, and remained hidden, suppressed during the darkest years of oppression against Indigenous peoples. But by the 1980s a movement began to resurrect it. This movement culminated in the Paddle to Seattle in 1989.²⁰

The Paddle to Seattle was organized by Quinault Tribal elder Emmett Oliver. It involved canoes from 17 Western Washington tribes and British Columbia 'Indian Bands' (as they were then known) traveling to Seattle and stopping at different reserves along their routes. The occasion was the 100th anniversary of the creation of the State of Washington, and the stated purpose was to give a rebirth to the canoe building and canoe paddling culture of the Coast Salish people.²¹

It was a successful event that resulted in an annual intertribal paddle, and expanded to include nearly every Nation along the Salish Sea.²² The Paddles continue to this day, with rotating destinations like the Olympics, hence the Paddle to Elwha (2025)²³, the planned Paddle to Nisqually (2026)²⁴, and the planned Paddle to Suquamish (2029)²⁵.

As with the first Paddle to Seattle, dozens of crews of Coast Salish people prepare their finest traditional canoes and paddles, and travel from their home communities for a days long journey to the collective destination, singing, publicly practicing their culture, and performing ceremony

¹⁹ Importance of the Salish Sea Ecosystem. Government of Canada. (2024). <https://www.canada.ca/en/services/environment/cumulative-effect/about/salish-sea-ecosystem/importance.html> and Shields, N. (2017). The Salish Highway Uncovers Indigenous Culture in Canada. Zen Seekers. <https://www.zenseekers.com/story/salish-highway-uncovers-indigenous-culture-canada>

²⁰ Sherrard, J. (2024). A Quinault Tribal Elder launched paddle to Seattle for WA's 1989 Centennial. The Seattle Times. <https://www.seattletimes.com/pacific-nw-magazine/a-quinault-tribal-elder-launched-paddle-to-seattle-for-was-1989-centennial/>

²¹ Red Eagle, P. H. (2022). Carrying Traditions by Canoe: The Tribal Journeys Movement in Washington. Washington Trust for Historic Preservation. <https://preservewa.org/carrying-traditions-by-canoe-the-tribal-journeys-movement-in-washington/>

²² Chin, V. (2023). Tribal canoe journeys: Strength in tradition. Maritime Washington. <https://maritimewa.org/story/tribal-canoe-journeys-strength-in-tradition/>

²³ Paddle to Elwha — dams removed, a river reborn, spirits renewed. Paddle to Elwha. (2025). <https://paddletaelwha.com/>

²⁴ Medicine Creek Potlatch Journey. Nisqually Indian Tribal Government. (2026). https://www.nisqually-nsn.gov/heritage/Medicine_Creek_Potlatch_Journey

²⁵ Miller, D. [@DeniseMiller] The Captain's Journey To Nisqually — July/Aug. (2026) Suquamish in the house!!! Chairman Leonard Forsman, Tribal council members Azure Bleu Boure, Mrs Carper the Youth, and beautiful speaker Calina Lawrence [video]. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1170564559672281/posts/24551116324523775/>

at each stop along the way. It is a symbol of the enduring culture of harmony, faith, and commerce between Coast Salish nations throughout the region.

One aspect of the paddles that was noted from the first Paddle to Seattle was the ceremonial acknowledgement that was performed by canoe crews when they came ashore. It was described in a 2002 State of Washington curriculum guide titled “The Challenge of the Paddle to Seattle” about the 1989 Paddle to Seattle.²⁶

One by one, the captain of each canoe stood and announced his people: “We are the Makah Nation,” “We are the Quinault Nation,” “We are the Klallam Nation.” The chants came until every tribe had been introduced to their Duwamish hosts on the beach. Each leader said a prayer and greeting in his language, and asked to come ashore.

A portion of the standard request to come ashore was quoted verbatim in a news report covering a 2023 Paddle event. An unnamed paddler said: “We are raising our hands to the people of this land. We are honored to be on your beaches and we ask permission to come ashore.”²⁷

The complete formula for the request was described in a document put out by the S’Klallam Tribe in partnership with the Washington State Parks Commission:

*What happens when canoes land? Canoe families will ask the host Tribe(s) permission to come ashore. They will introduce themselves, their intentions during their visit, sing a song and/or ask a person of honor to speak.*²⁸

Contemporary newspaper coverage of the 1989 Paddle to Seattle shows that this description matches what was done during the first ‘Paddle’.²⁹

The structure of this request resonates in Coast Salish culture, where it draws on an older register of diplomacy and hospitality. Dr. Keith Carlson relays an account from the late Upper Skagit elder and linguist Vi Hilbert, who traced the request to come ashore to a much older practice. As Hilbert described it to Carlson, when their canoes approached a village, they hoped would host them, distant in-laws and visiting elites from neighbouring peoples would call out a formal address. It was a statement of humility, one that placed the arriving party under the generosity of their hosts. In her account, the words ran something close to: “We near your shores in humility; we know you are rich, and we know you would never let us or our children go

²⁶ Marich, P., & Bragg, L. (2002). The challenge of the paddle to Seattle. Evergreen State College.

²⁷ Harrison, D. (2023). Paddle to muckleshoot landing day attracts thousands of participants. Smoke Signals. <https://www.smokesignals.org/articles/2023/08/14/paddle-to-muckleshoot-landing-day-attracts-thousands-of-participants/>

²⁸ Jamestown S’Klallam Tribe & Washington State Parks Commission (2024), Canoe Journey 2024 Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ). <https://parks.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2024-07/Canoe%20Journey%202024%20FAQ%20Draft%207.19.24.pdf>

²⁹ CBC News. [CBC British Columbia]. (2023). Paddle to Seattle [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fs64fKabQ0U>

hungry as we pass through your territory.” The effect was to make refusal all but impossible, and in doing so to turn a potential threat into a welcomed guest.³⁰

Practices like these can be read as expressions of a broader body of Coast Salish law, which the Skagit call *ch’ech’itsul*—a code I explore in depth later in this paper. The exchange placed both sides under obligation. The visitors were expected to keep affirming the host’s wealth, the correctness of their protocols, and their standing as people who understood the duty to share. The hosts, for their part, secured more than goodwill: by giving rather than defending, they avoided resort to force, advertised their status to an ever-wider audience, and established a claim on reciprocal generosity when they in turn travelled into the visitors’ territory. Hospitality here was not sentiment but a durable, self-renewing relationship of mutual obligation.

For Carlson, correct observance of the code was also a statement about who one was. In making the call properly, visitors declared themselves *Xwelmexw*—people of the land who know the rules, the protocols, and how to conduct themselves—as distinct from *Latsumexw*, the “strange people” who did not follow those rules and who therefore raided rather than requested.³¹ To perform the protocol correctly was to signal that one belonged to the order of people who could be trusted to reciprocate.

This was the weight a request to come ashore once carried—an act freighted with obligation and reciprocity, and inseparable from a people’s sense of who they were. It should be no surprise, then, that the Paddle re-popularized traditional protocol, such as *ch’ech’itsul*-style acknowledgements. The event was never really about the canoes in and of themselves. In establishing the Paddles, Oliver intentionally sought to include as many elements of the ancestral culture, as many ceremonies, protocols, and as many customs as possible. In a 1989 interview to promote the event, Oliver explained:

*the canoe sort of lent itself as a symbol of what we call a culture element [...] it could have been language, could have been arts, it could have been any other.*³²

The goal was to revitalize the culture among Coast Salish youth. To that point, another early organizer of the Paddles was a man named Philip Red Eagle, who in 2020 wrote of the Paddles that:

Another, and stronger, element of the [Tribal Paddle] program would be the use of Traditional Ceremonies handed down by the elders of many of the tribes in the region. It would be these ceremonies that would bind the various tribes and tribal organizations into a contiguous movement toward traditional values and processes. We also decided that these ceremonies and traditional practices would be placed in the canoe. The canoe would carry these practices and values

³⁰ Keith Thor Carlson, personal communication (email), July 14, 2026, recounting a conversation with the late Upper Skagit elder and linguist Vi Hilbert.

³¹ Carlson, personal communication (email), July 14, 2026.

³² Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. [officeofsuperintendentofpu5650]. (2017). Emmett Oliver’s 1989 Paddle to Seattle [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wcz6TaTrQJ0>

*and would teach the young people, and others who cared to learn, these elements.*³³

Canoe crews followed through on Oliver's mission and one of the protocols they followed was the acknowledgements spoken at their arrival at reserves along their respective routes³⁴.

In interviews for this article, informants confirm witnessing these acknowledgements during the paddles. Former Chief Kim Baird of the Tsawwassen Nation (located near Vancouver, British Columbia) confirms that "it was a request to come ashore".³⁵ In a conversation with Squamish Nation (also near Vancouver) former councillor and spokesperson Khelsilem, he stated that he had seen these acknowledgements in numerous locations at subsequent paddles and both Khelsilem and former Chief Baird connected the practice to present-day land acknowledgements.³⁶

The Paddle to Seattle was a major community event, and those present included the entire leadership of each Nation that was visited. Those in attendance included chiefs, councillors, extended family leaders (sometimes called 'hereditary chiefs')^{37 38}. The 1980s was a transitional period when culture and faith were re-emerging from behind closed doors, and out into the public. For many band and tribal leaders, this may have been the first time they were exposed to authentic protocols.³⁹

After the Paddle to Seattle, band and tribal leadership took the practices home, and observers report seeing them using acknowledgements in other intertribal forums. Acknowledgements were modified from maritime to office settings, losing the request to come ashore, and replacing it with a humble thank-you for being hosted at the meeting.⁴⁰

Just as the Paddle succeeded in resurrecting the inter-tribal marine journeys and creating an enduring legacy, it also succeeded in extending the ceremonial acknowledgements of territory—taking the practice from the traditionalists in the longhouse, to rank and file tribal members in

³³ Red Eagle, P. H. (2022). Carrying Traditions by Canoe: The Tribal Journeys Movement in Washington. Washington Trust for Historic Preservation. <https://preservewa.org/carrying-traditions-by-canoe-the-tribal-journeys-movement-in-washington/>

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ K. Baird, personal communication, May 9, 2025.

³⁶ Khelsilem, personal communication, May 5, 2025.

³⁷ Thom, B. (2003, September 9). Intangible property within Coast Salish First Nations communities, British Columbia [Paper presentation]. WIPO North American Workshop on Intellectual Property and Traditional Knowledge, Ottawa, ON, Canada. <https://onlineacademiccommunity.uvic.ca/ethnographicmapping/wp-content/uploads/sites/6278/2025/08/paper-wipo.pdf>

³⁸ On the family-based structure of Coast Salish leadership more broadly, see Keith Thor Carlson, *Colonial Fracture and Community Cohesion: Governance in the Stó:lō Community of Shxw'ōwhámél* (National Centre for First Nations Governance, 2007), for its expression at Shxw'ōwhámél, and Thom (2003) for extended-family leadership (xwnets'álewem) as characteristic of the Central Coast Salish region generally.

³⁹ Canada's residential schools: The final report of the truth and reconciliation commission of Canada. Volume 6, reconciliation. (2015). Published for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission by McGill-Queen's University Press.

⁴⁰ Walker, R. (2024). Land acknowledgments: From words to transformative actions. Salish Current. <https://salish-current.org/2024/05/29/land-acknowledgments-from-words-to-transformative-actions/>

band and tribal government. As noted by former Chief Kim Baird, by the mid-1990s (the same time the acknowledgement of territory was just being invented in Australia), land acknowledgements had already become an established standard practice at any formal meeting between different First Nations governments in southwestern British Columbia.⁴¹

⁴¹ Todd, D. (2021). Unceded: Why we acknowledge, or don't, that B.C. First Nations never signed away land. Vancouver Sun. <https://vancouversun.com/opinion/columnists/unceded-why-we-acknowledge-or-dont-that-b-c-first-nations-never-signed-away-land>

CROSSING OVER TO NON-INDIGENOUS USE

By the 1990s, the First Nations of Metro Vancouver had formed strong relationships with non-Native institutions. In an interview for this paper, Professor Keith Carlson (University of the Fraser Valley) highlighted the connections between the Musqueam Indian Band in Vancouver and the University of British Columbia. Those ties are very strong today, but they began with meetings in the late 1900s.

Dr. Carlson suggested that it was at Musqueam, where the practice of land acknowledgements first crossed over from the Musqueam Indian Band to UBC: “I believe the practice of settlers making land acknowledgements started in earnest in Vancouver with faculty and students at UBC acknowledging Musqueam.”⁴² A review of web and media archives seems to bear that out.

In a 2000 Vancouver Sun article, columnist Pete McMartin wrote about a new sign posted in the UBC Museum of Anthropology:

When you enter the UBC Museum of Anthropology these days—just so you know where you stand, so to speak—a sign at the entrance to the museum’s great hall reads: “Welcome to the traditional territory of the Musqueam people.”⁴³

That a Vancouver institution was posting territorial acknowledgements as early as 2000 (years before the practice spread nationally) supports a transmission path from Musqueam to UBC, and from UBC to the wider world.

The Musqueam Indian Band has a uniquely important geographic position among First Nations. It is located within the city of Vancouver, with territory that includes both UBC and the Vancouver International Airport.

Consequently – as a result of their geographical position – the Musqueam have been publicly involved in many ceremonial welcomes to visiting dignitaries. For instance, a 1998 Vancouver Sun story covered the arrival of Sumo wrestlers to Vancouver, and their formal welcome by the Musqueam people. “When your plane landed here today, it landed on the traditional territory of the Musqueam,” said Chief Gail Sparrow. “We are a people of greeting and gathering.”⁴⁴

The Musqueam are not alone in performing ceremonial welcomes. BC newspaper archives show First Nations performing ceremonial welcomes on a regular basis dating back to the 1920s. A typical report looks like this, from the April 26, 1948, edition of the Vancouver Province:

Delegates received an Indian welcome when they arrived Sunday morning for the 13th annual convention of the Canadian Jewelers Association. Chief Mathias Joe of the Capilano Indians (Squamish Nation), seven “braves” and a bevy of maidens (Vancouver models) danced a unique and colorful greeting to the beat of tom-toms in the CPR station.⁴⁵

⁴² Keith Thor Carlson, personal communication (email), May 1, 2025.

⁴³ McMartin, P. (2000). Museum makes up for bad old days. Vancouver Sun.

⁴⁴ McQueen, K. (1998). Sumo wrestlers known as poised gentleman giants. Vancouver Sun.

⁴⁵ Tom-Tom Dancers Open Jewellers’ Convention (1948). The Vancouver Province.

Former Squamish Nation councillor and spokesperson Khelsilem offered insight into how Coast Salish ceremonial welcomes for outsiders came about. He explained that during one of the harsher eras of oppression against Native people in the Coast Salish region, youth who were involved in our traditional cultural dancing ceremonies took the controversial decision to turn some elements of ceremony into performances for outsiders. These found a willing audience and soon troops of Indigenous dancers would perform ceremonial welcomes at events and to visiting dignitaries across the Coast Salish region. Turning ceremony into performance allowed Coast Salish traditionalists to keep their culture alive, and to preserve regalia which, in other regions, was destroyed by colonial authorities.⁴⁶

Sts'ailes (Harrison Lake area, British Columbia) councillor Kelsey Charlie shared a similar story from his First Nation. He told me about how his Nation used the story of "Sasqets" (aka "Sasquatch") to continue hosting intertribal cultural ceremonies in the face of oppressive colonial authorities. Charlie explained that going back to the 1930s:

They used to hold a canoe race here [Harrison Lake], and a festival, called Sasquatch Days. All the Coast Salish would come, [there would be] canoe races, dance performances. It was one of the only times you were allowed to really practice culture and tradition. They called it a race or a festival, but it was ceremony. It was our way of doing it in public, without going to jail.⁴⁷

The threat of jail was real. Prior to the 1951 reforms of Canada's Indian Act – the piece of federal legislation that regulates the relationship between First Nations people and the federal government – it was illegal for First Nations people to appear in regalia or hold gatherings of more than a few people. Federal officials called 'Indian Agents', wielded power beyond the letter of the law, to suppress Indigenous faith, culture, and language and would punish those First Nations people who disobeyed them.⁴⁸

Ceremonial welcomes are a common occurrence today in British Columbia, and as with all Coast Salish cultural practices, they come with a price tag. Cheam First Nation (Fraser Valley, British Columbia) elder Denise Douglas shared an anecdote about a time when a non-Indigenous organization attempted to treat a Ceremonial Welcome as a Land Acknowledgement and not offer sufficient payment. Payment is a ceremonial imperative in Coast Salish culture, so without payment the drummers and the speaker refused to do the 'Work' and instead the speaker took to the microphone to extend his sympathies to the organizers because they were "so poor", and then he and the drummers left.⁴⁹

This context suggests two reasons why Land Acknowledgements became established so quickly in British Columbia. First there is the niche of ceremonial welcomes that Acknowledgements can fit into. And then there is the price point. Ceremonial welcomes are typically delivered by someone participating in the event who receives honoraria—Welcomes can cost hundreds of dollars, while Land Acknowledgements are typically delivered by someone

⁴⁶ Khelsilem, personal communication, May 5, 2025.

⁴⁷ Brown, J. & Jago, R. (Hosts). (2022). The True Story of Sasquatch (No. 816) [Audio podcast episode]. In Canadaland. <https://www.canadaland.com/podcast/816-the-true-story-of-sasquatch/>

⁴⁸ Hinge, G., 2 CONSOLIDATION OF INDIAN LEGISLATION. VOLUME II: INDIAN ACTS AND AMENDMENTS, 1868–1975. (1985). Department of Indian and Northern Affairs.

⁴⁹ Denise Douglas, personal communication, June 8, 2025.

participating in the event without compensation. In addition to these structural explanations, the political situation of the time added to the growth and expansion of Land Acknowledgements in BC.

Unlike most other provinces, British Columbia has few treaties, and even fewer in 1990 when the province and federal government formed the BC Claims Task Force to investigate how to resolve outstanding land claims.⁵⁰ That task force led to the creation of the BC Treaty Commission and a massive expansion of land claims in British Columbia. With the new claims process in place, and the first modern treaty being signed at Nisga'a, Non-Indigenous people became very aware that the land they lived on was unceded territory and was claimed by hundreds of different First Nations. It became imperative to learn whose land you were on.⁵¹

Outside of British Columbia, land acknowledgements grew slowly in the 1990s and early 2000s.⁵² But with the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's final report in 2015, land acknowledgements took off across the country. Acknowledgements were seen as a tangible way for regular people to participate in reconciliation with Indigenous peoples.⁵³

Unfortunately, putting land acknowledgements in more hands, especially non-Indigenous hands, saw them change significantly – the further they moved from their roots, the more land acknowledgements became about performance. Ultimately, they became objects for appropriation, which we will return to below.

⁵⁰ British Columbia Claims Task Force. (1991). The report of the British Columbia Claims Task Force. British Columbia Claims Task Force. https://bctreaty.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/BC_Claims_Task_Force_Report_1991.pdf

⁵¹ British Columbia Treaty Commission. (2023). About us. BC Treaty Commission. <https://bctreaty.ca/about-us/>

⁵² Coletta, A. (2019). Canada pays tribute to Indigenous people before hockey games, school days. Some complain it rings hollow. The Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/canadas-land-acknowledgments-draw-criticism-from-the-indigenous-peoples-theyre-supposed-to-honor/2019/07/25/8479ab14-accd-11e9-9411-a608f9d0c2d3_story.html

⁵³ Canada's residential schools: The final report of the truth and reconciliation commission of Canada. Volume 6, reconciliation. (2015). Published for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission by McGill-Queen's University Press.

THE CH'ECH'ITSUL CODE

Before we turn to discussing how land acknowledgements have been mis-appropriated, it is necessary to look at the deeper roots that they grew from. As was discussed above, land acknowledgements appear to have evolved from something called the ch'ech'itsul code.

Documented oral histories and ethnographic records from Coast Salish nations describe a common set of rules regarding land and resource management. While specific applications varied by nation and family, the underlying principles appear consistently across the territory. As noted, the Skagit people—a Coast Salish people whose homeland is located between present day Vancouver and Seattle—have a word for this set of rules: ch'ech'itsul.⁵⁴

The ch'ech'itsul code governed resource use, access, and obligations that all Coast Salish people share. It described the conditions under which family and outsiders could enter or utilize a territory, requiring them to formally acknowledge the owners and obtain permission. These acknowledgements were not symbolic gestures but clear undertakings, signalling to the hosts that the visitors understood and committed themselves to the rules and reciprocal obligations that governed interactions between groups.

Resource stewardship was the driver of strict ownership rules codified under the ch'ech'itsul. Stewardship and ownership applied to privately owned fisheries, seal hunting waters, wild potato harvesting grounds, mountain goat hunting grounds, and cranberry bogs, among many other things. For each, the ch'ech'itsul code affirmed ownership, regulated access, and served as a guarantee that the owners would never go hungry.⁵⁵

An example of the stewardship covered by the code can be found in the Katzie First Nation—a Coast Salish people in the Fraser Valley. During the cranberry harvesting season, the bogs—an important economic and subsistence resource, and the communal property of Katzie—were heavily guarded by the community. Men were stationed at the bogs to ensure that no one would attempt to harvest there before the berries were ripe. However, once they were ready, Katzie opened this resource to any who asked, giving priority based on closeness of connection to the Nation's families – with those furthest away required to compensate Katzie for access.⁵⁶

In the Coast Salish world, land tenure was not just well-defined but also functioned as an early system of regulated commerce, where compensation was often required for land and resource use.

⁵⁴ The term is recorded by Sally Snyder in her Skagit ethnography (Snyder, S. (1964). Skagit society and its existential basis [Doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania], 432) and rendered ch'ech'itsul by Brian Thom (Coast Salish Senses of Place, PhD diss., McGill University, 2005, 311). For ease of pronunciation, I follow Thom's transcription. Thom confirmed this attribution and the provenance of the term in correspondence: Brian Thom, personal communication (email), June 9, 2025.

⁵⁵ On Katzie communal ownership of the cranberry bogs and regulated access, see Luxton (1998); on Coast Salish resource tenure and privately held fishing, hunting, and gathering sites more generally, see Wayne Suttles, *Coast Salish Essays* (Talonbooks, 1987), and Thom (2005).

⁵⁶ Luxton, D. (1998). History of the Katzie people. In *The heritage resources of Maple Ridge*. District of Maple Ridge. <https://eire.ca/history/heritage/hist1.html>

Consequences of Violation

Beyond defining access to land and resources, the ch'ech'itsul code also prescribed strict punishments for trespassing. Failure to follow these protocols could result in being barred from future access—or worse. Nooksack (Washington State) leader Joe Louie described how this enforcement mechanism worked: “If he stayed over that time he is notified. If he came back and stayed there without asking, that is death is his punishment.”⁵⁷

These consequences must be understood within the context of pre-contact Coast Salish legal systems and the broader landscape of indigenous and pre-modern legal codes worldwide. Like medieval European forest laws that prescribed death for poaching⁵⁸, or property laws in early modern England that made theft a capital offense⁵⁹, Coast Salish law reflected the critical importance of resource management to survival⁶⁰. The severity of punishment for ch'ech'itsul violations is consistent with a broader pattern in pre-industrial societies, where legal protection of resource access was backed by the harshest available sanctions (see the medieval forest-law and early-modern English comparisons above). As recorded in historical accounts, a person violating the code would be considered a trespasser and “any trespasser was expected to be killed and buried on the spot by the first armed Native who saw him.” If you have lived and worked in Vancouver or Seattle for any length of time, it is possible that you have walked over the graves of people who violated the ch'ech'itsul code.⁶¹

Resources being assigned a monetary value, and trespassing carrying the punishment of death, signalled the weight Coast Salish people assigned to ch'ech'itsul rules for land and resource management. This demonstrates how fundamental these protocols are to Coast Salish culture—which is possibly why aspects of the ch'ech'itsul were among the first traditions brought back into public practice at events like the Paddle to Seattle and other intertribal gatherings.

The place of non-Indigenous people under the ch'ech'itsul code

The following interpretation draws on observed practice in ceremonial contexts and represents one framework for understanding how Coast Salish law might apply to those born on Coast Salish territory who are not Coast Salish by descent.

It is apparent from the Coast Salish acceptance of land acknowledgements and participation in welcomes that there is a political and legal relationship with non-Indigenous peoples under Coast Salish law. While many ceremonial welcomes refer to non-Indigenous peoples as guests, they do not specify what type of guest they are – are they visiting family, or just a tourist?

⁵⁷ Louie, J., & Orchard, I. (1967). Joe Louie #1 [Interview transcript]. University of Regina. <https://uregina.scholaris.ca/bitstreams/544a4efe-e7c5-4fcb-a4fe-85a5edcc5195/download>

⁵⁸ Harris, C. (2015). The Charter of the Forest. The Canadian Encyclopedia. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/the-charter-of-the-forest>

⁵⁹ Summerson, H. (2022) “Hanging Matters: Petty Theft, Sentence of Death, and a Lost Statute of Edward I.” *Law and History Review* 40(1), 149–64. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0738248021000572>.

⁶⁰ On the relationship between Coast Salish resource tenure and subsistence security, see Suttles (1987); cf. the discussion of Coast Salish resource tenure and Katzie stewardship under “The Ch'ech'itsul Code,” above.

⁶¹ Snyder, S. (1964). Skagit society and its existential basis [Doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania], 432–433.

Practice suggests that those born here are treated less as strangers than as something closer to distant kin—extended a welcome to share that carries with it the obligations kinship implies. Were a pre-contact Coast Salish person to see the ways in which Canadians and Americans are welcomed into our communities and granted access to many of our resources, they might well read the relationship as something like that of in-laws at some remove: entitled to a share, but only so long as they honour the rules and protocols that access requires. That welcome was always conditional, and the newcomers who received it have more often than not failed to honour its terms. The relationship has never been uniform, either; different arriving peoples stood in different relationships to these protocols (for example the Hawaiians, so many of whom were absorbed without distinction into Coast Salish communities⁶²). Being an in-law comes with rights based on the relationship with the owners and stewards, and those rights are accessed by making a request under the ch'ech'itsul code.

Making a request under the ch'ech'itsul Code

Requests for land or resource use under the ch'ech'itsul Code typically arose in specific situations, such as:

- Seasonal resource gathering, where neighboring groups sought access to salmon streams or berry patches
- Trade and travel, requiring permission to pass through another family's or nation's territory
- Ceremonial visits, where guests acknowledged the landowners as part of formal greetings and gift exchanges (the so-called 'Potlatches')

Common to all three was the expectation of food exchange, and the understanding that a visitor granted access in one season would in turn become a host in another, facilitating reciprocal access to the resources of their own territory. Requests were often pro forma when strong kinship ties existed, particularly for minor requests. However, the further one moved from close kinship connections, the more difficult it became to secure approval. When requests involved significant use of land or resources, negotiations were more complex and often required additional exchanges or demonstrations of trust. For some resources, such as the mountain goat hunting grounds of the Nooksack, access to outsiders was rigidly restricted.⁶³

It is these requests under the ch'ech'itsul code that inspired the ceremonial acknowledgements performed during the Paddle to Seattle, and that evolved into today's Land Acknowledgements.

⁶² On Hawaiian settlement, intermarriage with Coast Salish families, and the absorption of their descendants, see Barman, J. (1995). *New Land, New Lives: Hawaiian Settlement in British Columbia*. *The Hawaiian Journal of History*, 29, 7–32. <https://hdl.handle.net/10524/429>

⁶³ Thom (2005), 311. On the control of, and restricted access to, productive resources on the Northwest Coast more generally, see Richardson, A. (1982). *The control of productive resources on the Northwest Coast of North America*. In N. M. Williams & E. S. Hunn (Eds.), *Resource Managers: North American and Australian Hunter-Gatherers* (pp. 93–112). Westview Press.

The ch'ech'itsul Code and Canadian Law

In 2025, Justice Young of the BC Supreme Court issued a ruling in *Cowichan Tribes v Canada* – commonly called the Cowichan Decision. The court recognized Cowichan Tribes' title over a portion of Lulu Island, south of Vancouver.⁶⁴

Effectively, the Cowichan case turned on questions of territorial access and authority interpreted through the lens of the ch'ech'itsul code, though the court did not explicitly frame its analysis in these terms. Musqueam's position—as understood through the court record—was that Cowichan could only access the disputed site on Lulu Island through kinship-based permissions, which under ch'ech'itsul would require a formal request. Which is to say that Musqueam claimed to own the land, and said that Cowichan individuals could only access it through family connections in Musqueam, as was their right under the ch'ech'itsul code.

Justice Young's finding that “the permission of Musqueam and other hə́ŋdə́mihəm-speaking peoples of the lower Fraser River was not required for resource access” meant that Cowichan, not Musqueam, owned the land, and were not accessing it under ch'ech'itsul code rules of kinship access. While the Cowichan decision has alarmed many, it has nonetheless shown the historical and enduring existence of the ch'ech'itsul code and its relevance to questions of land title today.⁶⁵

That being said, the ch'ech'itsul code is not the final statement on land title in the Coast Salish world. The reality is that Coast Salish people and customs account for the differing scale of requests and make distinctions between those which are for simple acknowledgements of the existing relationship, and those which carry the weight of treaties and involve the transfer of ownership.

In pre-contact times, a request to come ashore at a longhouse for the winter dances, and an agreement ending a territorial conflict were ceremonies of vastly different scale. Besides being a people of greeting and gathering, we are also a people of commerce, and understand price, property, and valuation and we do not sell our land cheaply.

Contents of a ch'ech'itsul Code Request

The structure of a ch'ech'itsul request is described in oral histories from many different nations. While there may be differences depending on the owners, the resource, and the relational distance, a formal request under the ch'ech'itsul code generally included several key elements:

1. **Introduction of the visitor**—The individual or group would state their identity, lineage, and connection to the owner
2. **Acknowledgment of the resource's owners**—A verbal recognition of the family or nation that held jurisdiction over the land

⁶⁴ *Cowichan Tribes v. Canada* (Attorney General), 2025 BCSC 1490.

⁶⁵ *Cowichan Tribes v. Canada* (Attorney General), 2025 BCSC 1490.

3. **Statement of intent**—A clear explanation of why access was being requested and for what duration⁶⁶

This may then be followed in some cases by the offering of gifts or services in exchange for permission. For example, labour exchanges were common in the Strait of Georgia/Salish Sea, where fishers paid in labour (similar to share cropping) for access to prime fishing locations. The scale of offering varied depending on relational proximity to the owners.⁶⁷ Think about renting out a spare room in your home – there is one rule for your brother-in-law, and another for a total stranger. One person might walk in and offer nothing more than a thanks, while the other might need to book and pay through AirBnB. This is effectively how access to resources was governed – though with the default principle that resources should be open to everyone after the owners have taken all they need.

⁶⁶ The elements of a formal request are described by Joe Louie for the Nooksack, who recounts a visitor asking permission, stating the purpose (“beaver meat”), and the duration (“one week”), with overstaying punishable by death (Louie & Orchard, 1967). On owned resource tracts and access governed by connection to the owning family, see Luxton (1998) on Katzie wapato and cranberry grounds.

⁶⁷ On payment for resource access, see Thom (2005), 305–306, citing Suttles (1951) on hired reef-net crews compensated with a share of the catch, and Hill-Tout (1904) on tribute paid to the Chehalis for access to the Harrison salmon runs. The comparison to sharecropping reflects the author’s own experience of the Fraser River fishery.

THE MIS-APPROPRIATION OF LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Land acknowledgements evolved from a set of rules that position non-Indigenous people within Indigenous legal frameworks and recognize their place in Coast Salish kinship and property systems.

By the mid-2000s, land acknowledgements had spread beyond British Columbia to other Canadian provinces and eventually returned to the United States, where they were born.⁶⁸ As it moved, the practice continued to evolve away from its origins. Institutions began adding language about “stolen land”⁶⁹ and “reconciliation”—concepts absent from the original ch’ech’itsul-based protocol. These additions reflect Western frameworks of guilt, historical wrong, and redemptive action rather than Coast Salish legal concepts of territorial authority and ongoing relationship.

The word for this phenomenon is cultural mis-appropriation.⁷⁰ There are many aspects of other cultures that it is OK to adopt, without disrespecting them. The issue comes when non-Indigenous people change Indigenous cultural or legal practices to suit their own worldview.

The result is a practice that maintains the appearance of Indigenous protocol while functioning as what critics describe as “performative reconciliation”.⁷¹

Just as Indigenous people once turned ceremony into performance in order to preserve it, non-Indigenous people have adapted ceremony into performance for different purposes—often related to contemporary concepts of reconciliation and historical redress. However, these adaptations function differently: one preserved cultural practice during suppression, while the other transforms it in ways that may ultimately disconnect it from its cultural foundations.

⁶⁸ Stewart-Ambo, T., & Yang, K. W. (2021). Beyond land acknowledgment in settler institutions. *Social Text*, 39(1), 21–46. <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-8750076>

⁶⁹ Some Indigenous people, especially in the United States, use Land Acknowledgements to recognize that land has been stolen. However, even in those cases, the word is omitted from the model acknowledgement, which still conforms to historic protocol: Puyallup Tribe. (2020). Land acknowledgement. <https://www.puyalluptribe-nsn.gov/about-our-tribe/land-acknowledgement/>

⁷⁰ Strayer, C., & Grebliunas, R. (2024). Cultural Misappropriation. In *Indigenous Digital Literacies* (pp. 88–96). e-book, BC Campus. Retrieved from <https://opentextbc.ca/indigenousdigitalliteracies/front-matter/land-acknowledgement/>

⁷¹ Staines, J. (2026a). From Tokenism to truth-telling: Moving beyond performative reconciliation. *Koori Curriculum*. <https://kooricurriculum.com/blogs/news/from-tokenism-to-truth-telling-moving-beyond-performative-reconciliation-in-early-childhood>

ORTHOPRAXY VERSUS ORTHODOXY – A CONJECTURE

Understanding why this mis-appropriation occurred requires understanding a fundamental epistemological difference between Coast Salish and Western peoples. Coast Salish culture is based on orthopraxy—the concept that rightness comes from correct action. Western culture, particularly in its contemporary progressive forms, is based on orthodoxy—the concept that rightness comes from correct belief and feeling.⁷²

In orthopraxic systems, a ceremony or protocol has meaning because it is performed correctly according to established rules. The participants' internal feelings are secondary. What matters is that the right words are said, in the right order, by the right people, in the right circumstances⁷³. Jewish religious practices provide familiar examples—complex sets of rules governing behavior that must be followed regardless of emotional state.⁷⁴ Japanese social codes offer another parallel—precisely defined behaviors such as bowing protocols, gift-giving customs, and hierarchical speech patterns that define secular relationships.⁷⁵

These orthopraxic systems reflect a deep connection to a specific place in the world, and the empirical lessons learned from thousands of years in a single place. While a practice may not make immediate sense from the outside, the practitioners rest assured that it is being done because it has been tested by time, and observation and has a purpose that will help preserve and improve their lives.

These are the ways with Coast Salish people – we are a people of greeting and gathering, of organized commerce, reciprocal and ostentatious sharing. We do not pray for redemption, but we behave correctly according to the rules of our culture so that redemption may find us.

The ch'ech'itsul code is a product of this culture of correct behavior. If one is to be worthy, one must follow the laws.

This does not make correct action a merely outward or secular matter. In Coast Salish understanding, performing the protocol correctly is not separate from an inner state; it manifests it. To act correctly is to show that one is of good mind—in proper balance and supported by the ancestral and spirit helpers who validate one's worthiness. Right belief and right feeling are not dispensed with; they are the precondition for right action, and it is through the action that they are made visible to others and given real weight. This is also what distinguishes Coast Salish praxis from the modified acknowledgement examined below. In the modified form, feeling is turned inward and made to stand on its own, detached from any correct action and obligating the speaker to nothing. In the older practice, a proper inner state is expressed and tested through public, obligation-creating action—so that what creates the obligation is never private sentiment, but the correctly performed act and the relationships it enacts.

⁷² Beyer, C. (2019). Orthopraxy vs. Orthodoxy. Learn Religions. <https://www.learnreligions.com/orthopraxy-vs-orthodoxy-95857>

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Japanese Social Customs & Etiquette. Japanese Rituals. (2026). <https://japaneserituals.com/social/>

Contrast that with western individualism which centres the subjective heart. Orthodox cultures have practices adopted from the four corners of the globe and are divorced from the land they live on. In its warm Middle Eastern homeland, Easter is a celebration of rebirth, in England or Canada, it comes when there is still snow on the ground. In those places it may be difficult to understand the meaning of ceremony as it has been disconnected from the space and time that created it. Consequently, people in orthodox cultures turn inward to find meaning.

When people from orthodox cultural backgrounds encounter an orthopraxic practice like a Land Acknowledgement, the experience can feel incomplete or unsatisfying. Without the emphasis on internal feeling or personal meaning that orthodox practices typically provide, some respond by dismissing the practice as mere performance, or by adding elements—personal reflections, expressions of guilt, commitments to reconciliation—that restore a sense of emotional engagement.

This accounts for the frequent advice to expand land acknowledgements—to add personal reflection, discuss reconciliation, express feelings about historical wrongs. While well-intentioned, these modifications fundamentally alter the practice. They shift its function from positioning oneself within an Indigenous legal framework to performing personal gestures about colonialism. This represents cultural mis-appropriation—taking a practice developed by one culture and reshaping it to serve the psychological or political needs of another, ultimately turning something legitimately meaningful into culture war spectacle.

In 2025 King Charles visited Canada and opened the new parliamentary session. He opened his Speech from the Throne with a land acknowledgement – the first performed by any reigning Canadian monarch. Consider what it means when the King recites a land acknowledgement on the floor of Parliament. From a Coast Salish legal perspective, this positions him within a framework created by Coast Salish people, based on Coast Salish law.⁷⁶

That is the real meaning – doing the land acknowledgement simply and correctly is the meaning in and of itself. The King of the Kinchochmen (the Coast Salish term for Canadians – literally “King George’s Men”) carried out his obligations under our law. So how much worse would it be if the King changed it to talk about his feelings, or if he adapted it further until nothing that bound it to Indigenous people was left?

The performance itself, in orthopraxic logic, is the point. Doing the right thing – doing it ‘in a good way’ (as Indigenous people often say) – correctly creates meaning. The problem is not performance but incorrect performance disconnected from the protocols that give it weight.

⁷⁶ Privy Council Office. (2025). Speech from the Throne. Government of Canada.
<https://www.canada.ca/en/privy-council/campaigns/speech-throne/2025/speech-from-the-throne.htm>

CORRECTED LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Land acknowledgements as they are today have been mis-appropriated to an extent that they are almost unrecognizable. The intentions behind many of them is a mystery known only to the non-Indigenous people who perform them. Tracing them to their roots, we see that Land Acknowledgements are powerful statements on the relationship and kinship between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples who share this land.

For land acknowledgements to function as intended, they must follow Coast Salish practice and adhere to the structure that emerged from ch'ech'itsul code.

The proper formula has three parts:

1. Introduce and situate the speaker
2. Acknowledge the stewards of the territory
3. Explain the intent behind the event⁷⁷

An example:

My name is Jane Doe, I am the Dean of the Arts Department here at X University. I was born and raised in Vancouver. I want to begin today by acknowledging that we are hosting today's conference in the territory of the Musqueam, Tsleil-Waututh, and Squamish Nations.

The acknowledgement should not mention that land was “stolen.” It should not dwell on personal feelings. The land has not been stolen—at least not in BC where land acknowledgements first took root. The situation is that sovereignty is contested, which is a different legal and political reality.

What It Means When Done Correctly

A land acknowledgement is not the ch'ech'itsul code itself, but a practice that evolved from it. In contemporary usage, it represents the speaker confirming they understand their place in the partnership between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples—a partnership established long ago through historical interactions and ongoing relationships.

Done correctly, a land acknowledgement creates politically meaningful positioning:

- It recognizes the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples
- It positions the speaker as accepting the Coast Salish framework for territorial relationships
- It creates social and political accountability by publicly stating who has stewardship over the territory

In practice, this might look like a university president acknowledging Musqueam territory before a convocation ceremony, or a business leader recognizing Squamish territory before opening a

⁷⁷ This structure follows the ch'ech'itsul request form set out under “Contents of a ch'ech'itsul Code Request,” above.

conference. The acknowledgement doesn't transfer ownership, doesn't require emotional performance, and doesn't constitute a legal admission—it simply confirms that the speaker understands they are operating within a relationship where Coast Salish peoples hold stewardship.

Land Acknowledgements should not be adapted, injected with additional meaning, or made personal. Such modifications appropriate the practice into something it was never intended to be; they alienate people, rather than bring them together.

CONCLUSION AND FINDINGS

This paper has shown that land acknowledgements in North America originated in Coast Salish territory, emerging from the ch'ech'itsul code—the ancestral legal framework governing territorial access and resource stewardship. The practice evolved from the ceremonial requests to come ashore performed during the 1989 Paddle to Seattle, moving through intertribal gatherings before crossing over to non-Indigenous use at institutions like UBC in the late 1990s and early 2000s.⁷⁸ This timeline demonstrates that land acknowledgements developed independently from Australian practices.⁷⁹

The ch'ech'itsul code established clear protocols for those seeking to exercise their rights for territorial or resource access: acknowledge the stewards, identify yourself, and state your purpose. Land acknowledgements inherit this structure directly. When performed correctly, they position the speaker within a Coast Salish legal and kinship framework—confirming their understanding of the partnership between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples who share this territory.

Additional elements—references to stolen land, expressions of guilt, commitments to reconciliation—are mis-appropriations that shift the practice away from Coast Salish law toward Western therapeutic frameworks. These modifications, however well-intentioned, fundamentally change what land acknowledgements mean and do.

Coast Salish culture is orthopraxic—correctness comes from right action, not right feeling. The acknowledgement itself, performed correctly, creates meaning. There is no need to inject personal sentiment, historical grievance, or emotional performance. In fact, doing so appropriates the practice into something it was never meant to be, turning it into culture war spectacle that alienates people.

Those who choose to perform land acknowledgements should honour their origins by following the structure and intent established through Coast Salish practice. This respects the legal and cultural foundations from which these acknowledgements emerged while preserving their function as tools for relationship and recognition—done simply, done correctly, and in a good way.

⁷⁸ For the account of this transition to non-Indigenous use—including the Musqueam–UBC relationship and the territorial acknowledgement posted at the UBC Museum of Anthropology by 2000—see “Crossing over to Non-Indigenous Use,” above.

⁷⁹ For the divergent Australian and North American timelines supporting this conclusion, see “The current understanding,” above.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Acknowledgement of country and welcome to country. (2025). Reconciliation Australia. <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/reconciliation/acknowledgement-of-country-and-welcome-to-country/>
- Beyer, C. (2019). Orthopraxy vs. Orthodoxy. Learn Religions. <https://www.learnreligions.com/orthopraxy-vs-orthodoxy-95857>
- British Columbia Claims Task Force. (1991). The report of the British Columbia Claims Task Force. https://bctreaty.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/BC_Claims_Task_Force_Report_1991.pdf
- British Columbia Treaty Commission. (2023). About us. <https://bctreaty.ca/about-us/>
- Barman, J. (1995). New Land, New Lives: Hawaiian Settlement in British Columbia. The Hawaiian Journal of History, 29, 7–32. <https://hdl.handle.net/10524/429>
- Brown, J., & Jago, R. (Hosts). (2022). The True Story of Sasquatch (No. 816) [Audio podcast episode]. In Canadaland. <https://www.canadaland.com/podcast/816-the-true-story-of-sasquatch/>
- Canada's residential schools: The final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Volume 6, Reconciliation. (2015). McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Carlson, K. T. (2007). Colonial Fracture and Community Cohesion: Governance in the Stó:lō Community of Shxw'ōwhámél. National Centre for First Nations Governance.
- CBC News [CBC British Columbia]. (2023). Paddle to Seattle [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fs64fKabQ0U>
- Chin, V. (2023). Tribal canoe journeys: Strength in tradition. Maritime Washington. <https://maritimewa.org/story/tribal-canoe-journeys-strength-in-tradition/>
- Coletta, A. (2019). Canada pays tribute to Indigenous people before hockey games, school days. Some complain it rings hollow. The Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/canadas-land-acknowledgments-draw-criticism-from-the-indigenous-peoples-theyre-supposed-to-honor/2019/07/25/8479ab14-accd-11e9-9411-a608f9d0c2d3_story.html
- Cowichan Tribes v. Canada (Attorney General), 2025 BCSC 1490.
- Cyca, M. [michellecyca]. (2022). what's the worst land acknowledgement you've ever seen? [Tweet]. <https://web.archive.org/web/20220806193536/https://twitter.com/michellecyca/status/1525198115304636416>
- DuVal, K. (2025). Enough With the Land Acknowledgments. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/05/opinion/indigenous-people-land-acknowledgments.html>

- Gilmore, H. (2023). How a 50-year-old hippie festival sparked the welcome to country phenomenon. The Sydney Morning Herald. <https://www.smh.com.au/national/how-a-50-year-old-hippy-festival-sparked-the-welcome-to-country-phenomenon-20230508-p5d6q4.html>
- Government of Canada. (2024). Importance of the Salish Sea Ecosystem. <https://www.canada.ca/en/services/environment/cumulative-effect/about/salish-sea-ecosystem/importance.html>
- Harris, C. (2015). The Charter of the Forest. The Canadian Encyclopedia. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/the-charter-of-the-forest>
- Harrison, D. (2023). Paddle to Muckleshoot landing day attracts thousands of participants. Smoke Signals. <https://www.smokesignals.org/articles/2023/08/14/paddle-to-muckleshoot-landing-day-attracts-thousands-of-participants/>
- Hinge, G. (1985). Consolidation of Indian Legislation. Volume II: Indian Acts and Amendments, 1868–1975. Department of Indian and Northern Affairs.
- Jago, R. (2025). The Cowichan Decision and Coast Salish Law. Robert Jago's Substack. <https://rjago.substack.com/p/the-cowichan-decision-and-coast-salish>
- Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe & Washington State Parks Commission. (2024). Canoe Journey 2024 Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ). <https://parks.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2024-07/Canoe%20Journey%202024%20FAQ%20Draft%207.19.24.pdf>
- Japanese Social Customs & Etiquette. (2026). Japanese Rituals. <https://japaneserituals.com/social/>
- Land acknowledgement. (2026). Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Land_acknowledgement
- Louie, J., & Orchard, I. (1967). Joe Louie #1 [Interview transcript]. University of Regina. <https://uregina.scholaris.ca/bitstreams/544a4efe-e7c5-4fcb-a4fe-85a5edcc5195/download>
- Luxton, D. (1998). History of the Katzie people. In The heritage resources of Maple Ridge. District of Maple Ridge. <https://eire.ca/history/heritage/hist1.html>
- Marich, P., & Bragg, L. (2002). The challenge of the paddle to Seattle. Evergreen State College.
- McMartin, P. (2000). Museum makes up for bad old days. Vancouver Sun.
- McQueen, K. (1998). Sumo wrestlers known as poised gentleman giants. Vancouver Sun.
- Merlan, F. (2014). Recent Rituals of Indigenous Recognition in Australia: Welcome to Country. <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/server/api/core/bitstreams/e8d6948e-30d4-4013-a8d3-eea7e621abc5/content>

- Miller, D. [@DeniseMiller]. (2026). The Captain's Journey to Nisqually [Video]. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1170564559672281/posts/24551116324523775/>
- Museum of History & Industry. (2024). "Paddle to Seattle 1989" brochure. Collections and Research. <https://mohai.org/collections-and-research/search/item/2024.55/-%23.2/>
- Nisqually Indian Tribal Government. (2026). Medicine Creek Potlatch Journey. https://www.nisqually-nsn.gov/heritage/Medicine_Creek_Potlatch_Journey
- Noisecat, J. B. (2025). The Tribal Canoe Journey, an Odyssey to reclaim tradition and territory. Canadian Geographic. <https://canadiangeographic.ca/articles/the-tribal-canoe-journey-an-odyssey-to-reclaim-tradition-and-territory/>
- Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. (2017). Emmett Oliver's 1989 Paddle to Seattle [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wcz6TaTrQJ0>
- Paddle to Elwha – dams removed, a river reborn, spirits renewed. (2025). <https://paddletaelwha.com/>
- Privy Council Office. (2025). Speech from the Throne. Government of Canada. <https://www.canada.ca/en/privy-council/campaigns/speech-throne/2025/speech-from-the-throne.htm>
- Puyallup Tribe. (2020). Land acknowledgement. <https://www.puyalluptribe-nsn.gov/about-our-tribe/land-acknowledgement/>
- Red Eagle, P. H. (2022). Carrying Traditions by Canoe: The Tribal Journeys Movement in Washington. Washington Trust for Historic Preservation. <https://preservewa.org/carrying-traditions-by-canoe-the-tribal-journeys-movement-in-washington/>
- Richardson, A. (1982). The control of productive resources on the Northwest Coast of North America. In N. M. Williams & E. S. Hunn (Eds.), Resource Managers: North American and Australian Hunter-Gatherers (pp. 93–112). Westview Press.
- SBS Australia [@sbsaustralia]. (2025). Welcome to Country is more than a ceremony [Video]. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/reel/1845478872885963>
- Scantlebury, A. (2023). Black Fellas and Rainbow Fellas: Convergence of Cultures at the Aquarius Arts and Lifestyle Festival, Nimbin, 1973. M/C Journal, 17(6). <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.923> (Original work published October 13, 2014).
- Schemmel, A. (2025). Watch: DNC opens Summer meeting with land acknowledgment, claims that US suppresses indigenous history. FOX News Channel. <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/watch-dnc-opens-summer-meeting-land-acknowledgment-claims-us-suppresses-indigenous-history>
- Sherrard, J. (2024). A Quinault Tribal Elder launched paddle to Seattle for WA's 1989 Centennial. The Seattle Times. <https://www.seattletimes.com/pacific-nw-magazine/a-quinault-tribal-elder-launched-paddle-to-seattle-for-was-1989-centennial/>

- Shields, N. (2017). The Salish Highway Uncovers Indigenous Culture in Canada. Zen Seekers. <https://www.zenseekers.com/story/salish-highway-uncovers-indigenous-culture-canada>
- Snyder, S. (1964). Skagit society and its existential basis [Doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania].
- Staines, J. (2026). The truth about welcome to country: What Anzac Day 2026 revealed about us. Koori Curriculum. <https://kooricurriculum.com/blogs/news/the-truth-about-welcome-to-country-what-anzac-day-2026-revealed-about-us>
- Staines, J. (2026a). From Tokenism to truth-telling: Moving beyond performative reconciliation. Koori Curriculum. <https://kooricurriculum.com/blogs/news/from-tokenism-to-truth-telling-moving-beyond-performative-reconciliation-in-early-childhood>
- Stewart-Ambo, T., & Yang, K. W. (2021). Beyond land acknowledgment in settler institutions. *Social Text*, 39(1), 21–46. <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-8750076>
- Strayer, C., & Grebliunas, R. (2024). Cultural Misappropriation. In *Indigenous Digital Literacies* (pp. 88–96). BC Campus. <https://opentextbc.ca/indigenousdigitalliteracies/front-matter/land-acknowledgement/>
- Summerson, H. (2022). Hanging Matters: Petty Theft, Sentence of Death, and a Lost Statute of Edward I. *Law and History Review*, 40(1), 149–164. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0738248021000572>
- Suttles, W. (1987). *Coast Salish Essays*. Talonbooks.
- Tan, M. (2016). Ernie Dingo and Richard Walley on the 40th year of their welcome to country. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/feb/23/ernie-dingo-and-richard-walley-on-the-40th-year-of-their-welcome-to-country>
- Thom, B. (2003, September 9). Intangible property within Coast Salish First Nations communities, British Columbia [Paper presentation]. WIPO North American Workshop on Intellectual Property and Traditional Knowledge, Ottawa, ON, Canada. <https://onlineacademiccommunity.uvic.ca/ethnographicmapping/wp-content/uploads/sites/6278/2025/08/paper-wipo.pdf>
- Thom, B. (2005). *Coast Salish Senses of Place* [Doctoral dissertation, McGill University]. <https://doi.org/10.82308/36718>
- Todd, D. (2021). Unceded: Why we acknowledge, or don't, that B.C. First Nations never signed away land. *Vancouver Sun*. <https://vancouversun.com/opinion/columnists/unceded-why-we-acknowledge-or-dont-that-b-c-first-nations-never-signed-away-land>
- Tom-Tom Dancers Open Jewellers' Convention. (1948). *The Vancouver Province*.
- Walker, R. (2024). Land acknowledgments: From words to transformative actions. *Salish Current*. <https://salish-current.org/2024/05/29/land-acknowledgments-from-words-to-transformative-actions/>

Interviews and Personal Communications

Baird, K. (2025, May 9). Personal communication.

Carlson, K. T. (2025, May 1). Personal communication (email).

Carlson, K. T. (2026, July 14). Personal communication (email).

Douglas, D. (2025, June 8). Personal communication.

Khelsilem. (2025, May 5). Personal communication.

Thom, B. (2025, June 9). Personal communication (email).