

What Does it Mean to be Indigenous?

This issue of Multicultural Moments will explore the meaning of the term *Indigenous* and the different ways we can learn about what it means to be Indigenous, including learning about the land and hearing about the culture through Indigenous tourism.

Defining Indigenous. The term *Indigenous* has a formal definition; however, members of Indigenous communities can offer personalized definitions for what it means to be Indigenous.

- According to the [Merriam Webster online dictionary](#), the word Indigenous derives from the Latin root *indu* or *within* combined with *gignere* which means *to beget*. The formal definition of the term is “produced, growing, living, or occurring natively or naturally in a particular region or environment.” In reference to people, the term means “of or relating to the earliest known inhabitants of a place and especially of a place that was colonized by a now-dominant group.”
- UCLA Office of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion explains what Indigenous means in [Native American and Indigenous Peoples FAQs](#). “...Indigenous refers to those peoples with pre-existing sovereignty who were living together as a community prior to contact with settler populations, most often – though not exclusively – Europeans.”
- In this CBC News video, [What Does Being Indigenous Mean?](#), members of the Indigenous community define what it means in their own terms. Common themes among these testimonials are the connection to the land, honoring and respecting ancestors and traditions, and resilience.

Indigenous Land. One way to understand what it means to be Indigenous is to learn about the land that Indigenous people have and continue to occupy.

- The World Bank estimates 476 million Indigenous people live worldwide, making up 6% of the world’s population [see [Indigenous Peoples Overview \(worldbank.org\)](#)]. The 2021 World Bank infographic, [How Indigenous are Countries in the Americas?](#), presents data on the largest Indigenous populations in the Americas with Mexico representing the largest Indigenous population at 25 million and Bolivia with the largest percent population at 48%.
- [Native Land Digital](#) is an online interactive map that lets users enter an address anywhere in the world to identify tribes, native languages, and treaties for their location. Users can use the map to connect to additional resources about the territories to learn more about the Indigenous nations of the lands on which they occupy.
- In the U.S., the term Indigenous often refers to American Indian or Alaskan Native. More than 50% of those who identify solely as American Indian live in one of five states (Oklahoma, Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas), according to the 2023 US Census Bureau report, [2020 U.S. Population More Racially, Ethnically Diverse Than in 2010](#).

- Congress of American Indians published [Tribal Nations & the United States: An Introduction](#) in 2020. The resource includes a map and data about the 547 federally recognized sovereign tribes or nations and 334 reservations across 35 states (pp 10-11).

Indigenous Tourism. Indigenous communities have a long history of trade systems that not only contributed to the economy but also educated others on Indigenous culture and sustainable practices (see [Exploring Indigenous Trade Networks: Pre-Colonial Commerce Unveiled \(historyfacts.org\)](#)). While these pre-colonial trade networks are well-documented, Indigenous communities continue this practice of cultural exchange in modern times through Indigenous tourism efforts.

- **Emphasis on Sustainability.** One major aspect Indigenous tourism involves members of the community sharing knowledge and expertise about caring for the environment and using sustainable practices that have been passed down through their culture. Read [Indigenous tourism: Empowering a sustainable future - Checkfront](#) to learn about these Indigenous-led tourism projects that earned almost \$2 billion in revenue in 2020.
- **Tourism with Meaning.** Other Indigenous tourism efforts meet the needs of travelers seeking educational and authentic experiences that immerse them in the food, language, culture, and other practices of Indigenous communities. Read about some of these experiences in a recent *Forbes* article, [As Travelers Search For Meaning, Indigenous Tourism Is Taking Off](#).
- **Highlighting Aboriginal Stories.** Indigenous communities around the world are telling their stories in their own words through tourism initiatives as described in [The Power of Indigenous Tourism: We Have a Story to Tell](#), part of a video series by the Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada.
- **NATIVE Act Tourism Projects.** [The Native American Tourism and Improving Visitor Experience Act \(or NATIVE Act\)](#), passed in 2016, “requires the Department of Commerce, the Department of the Interior, and federal agencies with recreational travel or tourism functions to update their management plans and tourism initiatives to include Indian tribes, tribal organizations, and Native Hawaiian organizations.” Read more about the many collaborative NATIVE Act projects at [Current Indigenous Tourism Projects | Indian Affairs \(bia.gov\)](#).

May we avoid blaming or bias based on our circumstance and continue to be grateful for the gifts of the global community.

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