



**NATIVE HOPE**

**HOW TO ADDRESS NATIVE  
AMERICAN ISSUES AS A NON-NATIVE:  
A RESOURCE FOR ALLIES**





## It's Time to Change the Current Story About Native Americans in This Country

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

Have you ever felt uncomfortably ignorant about the true history of Native Americans in this country?

You're not alone. If you are interested in showing up as an ally for the Native American population in this country or simply want to know more about a group of people who is routinely ignored, discriminated against, tokenized, and misunderstood, you've come to the right place.

Here at Native Hope, we are working hard to change the current story being told about Native Americans.

In this resource, you will find the information, inspiration, and challenge you need in order to become more thoughtful, more informed, and more passionate about the true story of the first Americans and about fighting for justice for your Native American brothers and sisters.



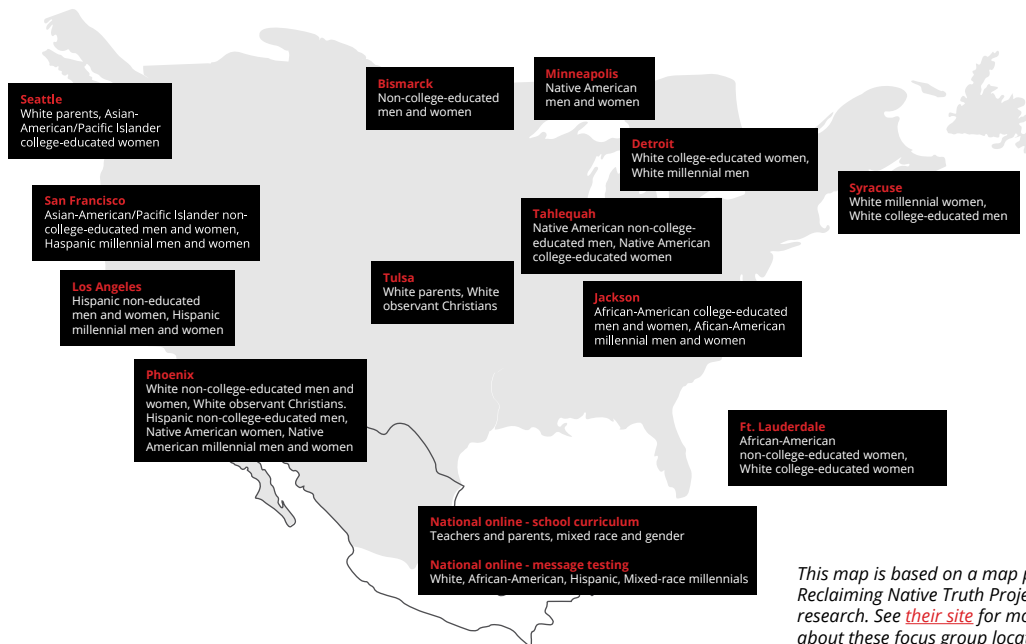
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 4** There Is Widespread Ignorance About Native Americans
- 5** Changing the Language We Use to Talk About the Native Experience
- 7** Exposing the Real Story Behind Common Misconceptions About Native Americans
- 10** Understanding Hot Button Native American Issues
- 12** What the Future of Native American Life Could Look Like
- 13** Action Items for Non-Native Allies
- 14** Connect with Native Hope



## There Is Widespread Ignorance About Native Americans

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



*This map is based on a map produced by the Reclaiming Native Truth Project to reflect their research. See [their site](#) for more information about these focus group locations.*

This project, the first of its kind, **exposed a widespread ignorance about Native Americans across all sectors of society.** This report conclusively demonstrates what Native Americans have known for years: the vast majority of Americans never think about Native American issues and have a vague sense that the population of Native Americans is declining. When pressed to examine their own perceptions, many have a confused, romanticized perception of the Native past and next to no knowledge of the modern realities.

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



## Changing the Language We Use to Talk About the Native Experience

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

It is crucial that Native allies, journalists, politicians, and other responsible parties **embrace a paradigm shift when it comes to the Native story in this country**. For too long, Native Americans, when discussed at all, have been featured and represented exclusively in terms of their struggles and difficulties. Yes, suicide, poverty, and addiction are serious problems within many Native communities, but there are many hopeful, positive, and normal stories to be shared about what it means to be Native American in this country.

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

We take the easy and lazy way out when we only talk about Native Americans in terms of the struggles and difficulties they face. The instinct to start with hopelessness, addiction, and poverty as the foundation of the Native story is dehumanizing and robs the living Native tradition of its richness and modern relevance.

## Key Takeaway

**\*DO:** Talk frequently and freely about the modern day life and presence of Native American people in society, the cultural contributions of Native people, the resilience and values of the Native tradition, and the ways in which Native people have suffered and are suffering as a result of oppression and discrimination.

**\*DON'T:** Raise awareness among friends and family exclusively by sharing sad facts and shocking statistics about the needs and challenges facing many Native communities today.

**\*DON'T:** Dominate the Native story with your own re-telling of it. Allow Natives to speak the truth for themselves.





## Exposing the Real Story Behind Common Misconceptions About Native Americans

There needs to be a great effort made to change the narrative of the Native American story as a whole by focusing more on the positive and allowing the truth of the Native story to stand out, full of dignity, resilience, and living relevance. We have to start this effort by re-formulating our basic assumptions and directly tackling some of the most common myths and misconceptions about Native American life.

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

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



## 4 Common Misconceptions About Native Americans



### 1. “Native Americans are just a bunch of alcoholics and addicts.”

This widespread cultural stereotype is deeply damaging to Native Americans and is not supported by the data. The data actually suggests that Native Americans have both the highest rates of complete abstinence and the highest rates of issues like binge drinking in comparison to other races. A majority of the Native population avoids consumption of alcohol entirely. **Scientific and cultural studies** have clearly shown that alcohol abuse among Native American populations is not a genetic phenomenon or a problem stemming from socialization. In fact, Native struggles with alcoholism and binge drinking are closely tied with the high rates of other mental health issues, all of which can be understood in light of **the intense legacy of historical trauma and generational pain** that this population faces.



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

These two contradictory ideas, often both held by the same person, are both false. Native Americans are both tribal citizens and American citizens just like everyone else. **They pay federal income taxes** and all other state and local taxes if they do not live on reservations, and do not receive assistance checks simply “for being Native American.” Any other funds that are paid to tribes or Native Americans come from legally binding treaty relationships or land agreements between the tribe and the United States government where land and resources have been exchanged for financial payments. Only a very small minority of tribes own and operate casinos. According to a recent study from Reclaiming Native Truth, **“the 43 casinos that generate the majority of all tribal gaming revenue benefit just 5 percent of tribal citizens.”**







**3. “Native Americans live on reservations, and there aren’t many of them left.”** The Native American population in this country is strong, young, and growing, and more than 80% of Native Americans live off of reservations. The odds are very high that you know someone who is Native American or who has Native American ancestry even if you do not realize it. Native Americans are not tucked away and slowly disappearing, they are living and working all around you as artists, doctors, lawyers, business people, mothers, and fathers. Due to the legacy of historical trauma, some Native communities do face big challenges and high rates of suicide, addiction, and poverty. However, Native Americans, even those who live on reservations, are full engaged with modern life and culture and many are finding beautiful, interesting ways to live their cultural traditions and values authentically in the midst of modern life.



**4. “Native Americans are all the same.”** The myth of the generic Native American person who speaks for and represents the whole vast diversity of Native cultures is a common one. The Native American population is made up of over 560 federally recognized tribes, and each tribe has a unique culture, tradition, and history. In addition, the Native experience since colonization is multi-faceted and incredibly distinct. The experience of a Native American who grew up in an urban setting far from a localized Native community is very different and no less “real” than the experience of a Native American who grew up surrounded by a Native community on a reservation in the midwest. Many Native Americans were taken from their families in the boarding school era and raised by white families, yet they carry their heritage with them as part of their story.





## Understanding Hot Button Native American Issues

Non-Native allies first need to examine their own hearts and minds in order to address the ignorance and bigotry within. Start to change your mental narrative about Native American life in this country. Begin to talk to family and friends about their perceptions of Native Americans and encourage them to find out the truth that sits behind their immediate perceptions.

You can also begin to look outward and speak up about [the many political issues that affect Native American life today](#).

In our current destructive political climate, all people of good will need to work together to protect the rights of Native Americans and to speak up when these rights are challenged.



## 4 Issues to Watch that Affect Native Americans

Here are some of the biggest issues that Native allies should be aware of and speaking up about. Be sure to let Native voices inform your opinions and responses to issues that affect Native American individuals and communities most directly, and only speak up when you've taken the time to learn what Native voices are advocating for.



**1. Land and Water Rights.** The Standing Rock crisis of last year did much to elevate and expose **the crucial issue of Native American land and water rights into the national conversation.** Native Americans have a reverent and deep-rooted connection with specific places, land, and water, and these sacred sites are routinely threatened and desecrated by government activity and exploitation.



**2. Education.** The state of education in Native American schools is abysmal. In 2015, Politico ran an exposé titled "**How Washington Created Some of the Worst Schools in America.**" When you read this article and others like it, the details are shocking, and yet reporting like this is infrequent. This issue, and many others related to Native populations, represents a humanitarian crisis, and many Americans live in complete ignorance of these facts. Every citizen in this country should be made aware of the horrific conditions in Native schools, the low graduation rates of this population, and the test scores that spell disaster for many Native childrens' hope for basic literacy.



**3. Healthcare.** Native Americans have a life expectancy that is 5.5 years less than all other races represented in the United States. Many Native American tribes lack access to high-quality healthcare due to poverty and geographic isolation. The healthcare that is available on reservations is unreliable and typically not trained to handle conditions that require specialized care. This lack of access, and particularly a lack of access to mental health care, is a crippling problem that feeds into cycles of poor health, addiction, and suicide. It is critically important that all Americans advocate for the necessity of basic care for their Native American brothers and sisters.



**4. Religious and Cultural Discrimination.** As recently as 1978, Native Americans became legally permitted to observe their religious practices freely and openly, including repatriation of sacred objects and protection of sacred lands. However, **little to nothing has been or can be done to enforce this law.** Native American tribes still find themselves fighting for recognition and for their legal right to observe their religious practices and protect sacred lands without interference. This is a serious First Amendment issue, to which all Americans committed to freedom should be paying attention.



## What the Future of Native American Life Could Look Like

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

- Native Children would be able to grow up seeing themselves and their culture accurately, respectfully, and frequently represented in mainstream media.
- Politicians would be forced to learn the truth about Native American life both on and off reservations and would be held accountable for their voting decisions on critical political issues.
- Native leaders, artists, and communities would find outlets who are eager to share and promote both the beautiful and successful and the difficult stories coming out of the Native experience.
- Dignity and humanity could be restored to a group of peoples who have been ignored, silenced, and oppressed for many generations.





## Action Items for Non-Native Allies

- **Change Your Language.** This is the crucial first step for any Native ally. Think hard about how you think and talk about Native Americans. Re-frame your thoughts and words to start from the positive truths about Native life, culture, values, and contributions, and discuss challenges only from this perspective. Share the positive and interesting things you can learn about the Native culture and experience with a friend, neighbor, or family member. Seek out, support, and share **stories of hope**.
- **Learn Your History.** No matter where you live in this country, there is a wealth of Native history in the landscape all around you. Go out of your way to learn the true history of your area and the Native community that existed there before colonization or that continues to live there. Visit historic sites, find resources in your local library, talk to a local historian, and go out of your way to find Native Americans who are indigenous to your region. This is the best and only way to combat the falsities or sketchy half-truths that most people absorb during their early years of education about American history and Native Americans.
- **Combat Racism and Bigotry.** Begin to challenge and correct the discrimination, racism, and misinformation you see around you. Demand better news coverage from mainstream journalists, support Native artists and businesses, speak up when you hear people sharing common misconceptions or hateful speech.
- **Support Advocacy Groups.** Look around for the organizations that are supporting Native wellbeing and changing the national conversation about what it means to be Native American and **support them with your time, money, or by sharing about their work** with your community.
- **Share Resources for Change with Your Community.** This is one of the most important things you can do as an ally. The work of undoing racism and discrimination in this country starts with your willingness to participate, to change your own heart and mind, and to share about the truth with those around you with courage and enthusiasm. Your voice should never supplant the Native telling of their own story, but you can provide a powerful atmosphere of support that helps a previously invisible people to emerge onto the national scene with full dignity.



## Connect with Native Hope

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

We hope that this resource has been helpful for you as you consider how you can contribute to the mission of dignity and healing for Native people as a non-Native ally.

Check out our other resources for more information and to learn how you can get involved.

[SUBSCRIBE TO THE BLOG](#)

[DONATE](#)

**Contact Us**  
**(888) 999-2108**  
**hope@nativehope.org**  
**PO Box 576 • 112 South Main Street**  
**Chamberlain, SD 57325**