

Indigenous Territorial Acknowledgement: What's That?

At the start of every Denman Island Local Trust Committee meeting, you will hear the chair recognize that we are on First Nations territory.

We get a lot of questions about this practice, which is called a territorial acknowledgement. These questions often lead to interesting discussions. This article summarizes some of that. If you are part of any group that carries out public business or runs events on Denman, you may want to consider including territorial acknowledgements.

Why make a territorial acknowledgement?

Territorial acknowledgements are a tradition that goes back centuries for indigenous people, who use them as part of diplomatic protocols.

These days, when non-indigenous people acknowledge territory, we are recognizing a history of indigenous use that goes back millennia, long before we or our settler ancestors arrived. Equally, it recognizes the present: indigenous people still call these lands home and have the right to do so.

If done sincerely, an acknowledgement is an act of reconciliation. It signals to the speaker, and everyone listening, a genuine intention to listen to and learn about indigenous perspectives, and to consider the implications of deep history and current indigenous/settler relationships in all we do.

An acknowledgement implies respect for the governance systems, land rights, languages, and cultural practices of the original people of this land. It implicitly says, "I am ready to be accountable."

How widespread is this practice?

The Islands Trust has been practicing territorial acknowledgements for five or six years throughout the Trust Area. It is now common at all levels of government, and is showing up at universities, the public school system and churches.

For instance, all 558 schools in the Toronto School Board district have a daily territorial acknowledgement read over the PA, often by students. Also, you will hear territorial acknowledgements at cultural and other community events.

How do you know what to say?

This is a good question that brings up even more questions. For instance, whose territory is it? The boundaries of indigenous historical and present use overlap. Denman is considered to be on the border of Coast Salish and Kwakwaka'wakw, and not only K'ómoks but also

Qualicum and Sliammon, and others, include it in their territory.

And what words should we use? Some people say the word "traditional" is not appropriate because it indicates something long past. Others believe it honours the connection to that past.

"Unceded" acknowledges an important truth: dating back many centuries, there was only three ways in which land could lawfully be settled as a "colony" – through the winning of a war or conquest over the people of the land, by the principle of *terra nullius* (also known as the Doctrine of Discovery) where land was completely empty of people, or by a signed treaty that ensured fairness to both signing parties and the people they represented.

In the words of the Islands Trust First Nations advisor Fiona MacRaild, "Unceded means none of these types of lawful occupation apply. The word reminds us of the ambiguity and uncertainty of how this will be resolved. When we use the word unceded, we are being consciously vulnerable about our own land rights and title to this place."

But using "unceded" in a territorial acknowledgement isn't accurate for places that are governed by a treaty (for instance, the Douglas Treaty, which applies in a number of local trust areas).

And what about 'ancestral'? It sounds powerful, but again, points to the past.

Major institutions, such as municipal governments or universities, strike committees that work for months on wording. The Islands Trust didn't go this far, but we do have a staff member dedicated to First Nations issues who has helped us.

Here's some concrete advice: if you want to be as neutral and safe as possible, you can just say, "I acknowledge that we are meeting on First Nations territory." You could add the word "respectfully" or a comment along the lines of, "And we are respectful of that," "We are grateful to have that privilege," or other wording that feels genuine to you.

If you want to go a bit further, here is a version that was suggested recently by the K'ómoks Nation's Chief Nicole Rempel and their staff archeologist-anthropologist-ethnohistorian, Jesse Morin:

"We acknowledge that we are meeting in the traditional unceded territory of the Pentlatch people." (According to Dr Morin, and affirmed by Chief Rempel, the "Pentlatch" include K'ómoks, Sliammon and Qualicum who all have interests in Denman and whose people were

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strongly connected).

Or you could follow the lead of the Hornby Island Ratepayers and Residents Association: “We acknowledge that Hornby Island and its surrounding waters are considered part of the core territory of K’omoks First Nation and part of the general traditional territory of other First Nations.”

What’s most important, I have often been told, is to be authentic. Don’t let this be just a rote exercise. If your sincerity is evident, questions about wording will not matter too much.

Doesn’t it feel kind of awkward?

Yes, it often does, until you get used to it. As Islands Trust Vice Chair I make territorial acknowledgements regularly, and at first it felt strange.

And that’s ok. I deal with the strangeness by reminding myself, “This is what change feels like – uncomfortable.” Also, I keep in mind that I am engaging in cross-cultural work, using a tradition from a foreign (to me) culture, so I shouldn’t expect it to feel natural at first. Discomfort, in this context, is a good sign.

What good does it do?

Acknowledgements are symbolic, and have limited impact if they are not backed up with action. At the same time, they can be powerful. Having the discussion about

“Do we want to do this? What words will we use?” changes people’s awareness and thinking. Speaking and hearing the words repeatedly reminds everyone present of the intention behind those words, and helps us keep indigenous perspectives in our minds.

Also, acknowledgements make the statement: “In this place, we are committed to reconciliation” (or justice, decolonization, indigenous rights...there are plenty of interesting words to choose from).

Also, some people have questions about, making territorial acknowledgements and this leads to conversations that deepen people’s understanding of the issues, and ideally build community.

Should my group start acknowledging indigenous territory?

That’s for you to decide. I wrote this article to stimulate discussion and share some useful information that I have learned so far.




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