



Northern
Territory
Government

THE OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER FOR PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT

Protocols for Acknowledgement and Welcome to Country



Acknowledgements

The Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment, Northern Territory Government, expresses its thanks and acknowledges the Department of Education, Government of Western Australia, for its willingness to make the Protocols for Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Traditional Ownership readily available. Adaptations have been made to suit the Northern Territory Public Sector with permission.

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Version 1, June 2010

Further information

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Introduction

It is important that the communities and environments in which the Northern Territory Public Sector (NTPS) operates and delivers services in, duly recognises and values the significance of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and peoples.

It is equally important to embrace the spirit of reconciliation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians, and for the NTPS employees to be inclusive of all groups.

Due recognition of the Traditional Custodians of country assists in developing strong partnerships with Indigenous communities across the Northern Territory. Therefore it is important that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander custodianship of country is recognised where Northern Territory Government (NTG) agencies events are held.

The NTG is committed to providing a supportive and culturally inclusive workplace environment for all public sector employees. In particular, we need to recognise and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the cultures by supporting the continuation of traditions, improving cross-cultural understanding and engendering mutual respect.

Showing respect and appreciation for the cultural diversity will also greatly enhance our reputation as an attractive employer and an employer of choice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditional custodianship of country through a formal process called *Welcome to Country*, will support this commitment to delivering the best services to communities and having workplaces that are more representative of the community we serve.



Image: Red Lily Billabong, Kakadu National Park, NT

History of *Welcome to Country* Protocols

A *Welcome to Country* is an important ceremony for many Indigenous groups around the world and has been a part of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture for thousands of years.

Arranging a *Welcome to Country* ceremony that acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land shows respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as Australia's First Peoples.

Practices such as a *Welcome to Country* enable the wider community to share in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, and lead to better community relationships and understanding. This practice connects participants with the country, and provides a welcoming atmosphere and spiritual presence to the place upon which people are meeting.

The observation of cultural protocols and the sharing of cultural practices can enrich relationships between local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and other cultural groups.

Reconciliation Australia provides a great insight into the history of *Welcome to Country* protocols;

“Despite the absence of fences or visible borders, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups had clear boundaries separating their Country from that of other groups. Crossing into another group's Country required a request for permission to enter – like gaining a visa – and when that permission was granted the hosting group would welcome the visitors, offering them safe passage.

For example, in some areas visitors would sit outside the boundary of another group's land and light a fire to signal their request to enter. A fire lit in response would indicate approval and welcome from the land owning group and often, on meeting, gifts would be exchanged. While visitors were provided with a safe passage, they also had to respect the protocols and rules of the land owner group while on their Country. Today, obviously much has changed and these protocols have been adapted to contemporary circumstances but the essential ingredients of welcoming visitors and offering safe passage remain in place”.¹

¹ <http://www.reconciliation.org.au/home/reconciliation-resources/facts--figures/qa-factsheets/welcome-to-and-acknowledgement-of-country>

The *Welcome to Country* Ceremony

A *Welcome to Country* ceremony is where a traditional Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Custodian or Elder welcomes people to their land.

Welcome to Country always occurs at the opening of an event and is usually the first item on the program. The local Traditional Custodians conduct the ceremony and this may be done through a speech, song, dance, ceremony or a combination of these things.

It is important for the Traditional Custodians to be comfortable with the arrangements. Organisers need to spend time talking with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to identify the Traditional Custodians and to outline the type of public event which is being organised.

In some areas of the Northern Territory there may be two or more language groups that have traditional custodianship of the land where the event is being held. In these circumstances, all groups should be approached and consulted regarding the *Welcome to Country* ceremony.



Image: Bullo River Cascades, NT

Who to Ask

Event organisers need to ensure that the Traditional Custodians are involved in the *Welcome to Country* ceremony. The *Welcome to Country* is a right of the local Traditional Custodians and not a privilege; it is not about political correctness or tokenism. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people employed at the local level in agencies may be able to advise organisers about the Traditional Custodians.

It is also advisable to seek advice from more than one source when establishing the local Traditional Custodians. Once this advice is sourced, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander networks within the NTG agencies will seek advice from a number of additional groups that may include:

- Local community people such as a community chairperson;
- The Northern, Central, Tiwi or Anindilyakwa [Land Councils](#); and,
- Local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations.

It is crucial to invite local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives into any planned discussions at the onset to work together to decide on when and where ceremonies and acknowledgements should take place, the format of the ceremony, who could and should be involved and an appropriate level of remuneration.

Making the initial contact with appropriate Traditional Custodians of country on which the meeting, event or function is to take place may not be a simple process. The initial connection process is often the most challenging. Observing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander protocol includes allowing time for traditional decision making and discussion among Traditional Custodians. This can take some time and should be factored into *Welcome to Country* planning processes.

Not all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can perform a *Welcome to Country* as it must be given by an appropriate person such as a recognised Elder within the local community. In some parts of the Territory there may be disputes about who the Traditional Custodians are. This should be recognised as an effect of dispossession where people have been dislocated from their land and have returned to an area where they may not be accepted by some as Traditional Custodians.

When organising a *Welcome to Country* for an event, organisers need to provide the Traditional Custodians (in some places there are more than one group) with information on the theme and purpose of the event. Elder/s representing the Traditional Custodians may choose to include in the welcome a traditional focus to the theme or purpose of the event. Organisers should also respectfully request that if a welcome is in language that it be translated into English so that the audience understands the welcoming message.

Response to *Welcome to Country*

It is appropriate for the speaker who follows immediately after the *Welcome to Country* ceremony to provide a response. Part of the response should acknowledge the person who delivered the *Welcome to Country*. If an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person from a different region is speaking, he or she may wish to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians and deliver a welcome from his/her own country. It is not necessary for every speaker to provide a response or acknowledge country.

The following text can be used in response to the traditional *Welcome to Country*:

I respectfully acknowledge the past and present Traditional Custodians of this land on which we are meeting, the <traditional name/s> people. It is a privilege to be standing on <traditional name> country, and I thank you for your warm *Welcome to Country*.

The following text could be used if the Traditional Custodians are different:

I respectfully acknowledge the past and present Traditional Custodians of the land on which we stand, the _____ people and the _____ people. We are honoured to be able to use this site with the approval of the Traditional Custodians.

However over time, individuals will develop their own preferred style and approach to a response to *Welcome to Country*, and this will change depending on the context and place of the event or meeting.



Image: Ghost Gums, Central Australia, NT

Acknowledgement of Country

Acknowledgement of country is a way that the wider community can demonstrate respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander customs and protocol and can be performed by any individual, participating in an occasion of any kind. It is a demonstration of respect dedicated to the Traditional Custodians of the land or sea where the gathering of participants is being conducted. Government agencies and community organisations are adopting the practice of acknowledging the Traditional Custodians of country at events, ceremonies, meetings and functions. Agency staff are encouraged to demonstrate appropriate acknowledgement when in forums such as formal gatherings, functions, ceremonies and events.

When to Acknowledge Traditional Custodianship

There may be events where it is not possible for the Traditional Custodians to provide a traditional welcome due to:

- unforeseen circumstances making it not possible or inappropriate for a traditional welcome ceremony (e.g. a death, funeral or illness);
- organisers not being able to make suitable arrangements with the Traditional Custodians (e.g. timeframes);
- prior engagement of the Traditional Custodians;
- the nature of the event being too small or not considered appropriate to warrant a welcome ceremony.

In these circumstances it is important that senior officers acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land in the appropriate way even though the event may seem to be irrelevant. As a suggested measure, where the event calls for the gathering of the whole agency, or all staff in a work area within agencies, there should be an acknowledgement of the Traditional Custodians of the land.

These events, due to their regularity should not require a traditional welcome ceremony but do require acknowledgement of traditional custodianship and the following is suggested:

I respectfully acknowledge the past and present Traditional Custodians of this land on which we are meeting, the <traditional name/s> people. It is a privilege to be standing on <traditional name> country.

Once again, over time, individuals will develop their own preferred style and approach to Acknowledgement of Country, and this will change depending on the context and place of the event or meeting.

Other Protocols and Ceremonies

NTG agencies recognise and acknowledge that there are a significant number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ceremonies and/or protocols that require respect. Some are sensitive and not discussed or shared with the broader community. These can include:

- knowledge that is specific to gender, commonly known as “Women’s Business” or “Men’s Business”;
- not mentioning the name of a deceased Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person or showing photographic images of a deceased person unless agreed to by the relevant family;
- initiation ceremonies; and
- the period of mourning for deceased Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people referred to as “Sorry Business”.

These practices may apply in some areas but not in all parts of the Northern Territory. In most cases people will acknowledge if these issues are sensitive and/or if they are not permitted to talk to you about the protocol or ceremony because of your age, gender status or because you do not belong to their Clan or Tribal Group. If in any doubt about these types of issues always ask.

The Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander representative or representatives should be comfortable with the arrangements that have been discussed. If you are unsure whether a group or individual may be sensitive about an issue or issues of protocol or ceremony, you can check with the local [shire](#) or local representatives from your agency.

It is also important to note that the NTG agencies endorse the view that performing a *Welcome to Country* ceremony is a **right** of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Custodians and not a privilege.



Image: NW Arnhem Land Coastline, NT

Useful Links

Department of Housing, Local Government and Regional Services

Regional Development

www.dhlgrs.nt.gov.au/rd

Council Information

www.localgovernment.nt.gov.au/council_information

Aboriginal Interpreter Services

www.dlgh.nt.gov.au/ais

Northern Land Council

www.nlc.org.au

Central Land Council

www.clc.org.au

Tiwi Land Council

<http://esvc001013.wic004ty.server-web.com>

Anindilyakwa Land Council

www.anindilyakwa.com.au

Reconciliation Australia

www.reconciliation.org.au

Australian Government

Culture Portal

www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au



Image: Smitt Rock, Katherine Gorge, Nitmiluk National Park, NT