ABORIGINAL COUNTRIES AND NATIONS · INFORMATION SHEET

Aboriginal Countries and Nations

Indigenous diversity, Country, and the importance of permission to enter

About this sheet. Cultural protocols, boundaries and languages differ between nations, and local Traditional Owners hold the cultural authority for their own Country. This sheet is general in nature and is designed to be paired with guidance from the Traditional Owners of the Country you live and work on.

Overview

Aboriginal Australia is not one culture but many. Long before 1788, and continuing today, this continent is made up of hundreds of distinct nations, each with its own language, Lore, Country and identity. The AIATSIS Map of Indigenous Australia represents more than 250 nations, and there are around 800 dialects. This is one of the most culturally diverse landscapes on Earth.

Central to this diversity is Country. Country means far more than land. It includes lands, waters, skies and all living things, and it is woven together with language, law, kinship, spirituality and identity. Each nation belongs to its Country, and its Country belongs to it. Understanding this is the starting point for respectful engagement, and for understanding why entering another nation's Country has always called for permission.

Purpose

This information sheet gives organisations an accurate, respectful and strength-based understanding of Aboriginal diversity, the meaning of Country, and the historical and continuing importance of seeking permission to enter another nation's Country. It supports culturally safe engagement, correct cultural protocols such as Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country, and genuine partnerships built on respect. It is general in nature and is designed to be paired with guidance from local Traditional Owners.

Objective

After reading this sheet, a reader should be able to:

- Explain that Aboriginal Australia is made up of many distinct nations, not one single culture.
- Describe what Country means, and how its boundaries differ from state and territory borders.
- Understand the historical and continuing protocol of seeking permission to enter another nation's Country.
- Distinguish a Welcome to Country from an Acknowledgement of Country, and apply each correctly.
- Identify the Traditional Owners of the Country they live and work on, and engage respectfully.

Times

Reading time	Around 10 to 12 minutes.
Suggested session	30 to 45 minutes when used to open a cultural awareness discussion, allowing time for the reflection questions.
Best paired with	Identifying the local Traditional Owners using the AIATSIS map, and arranging a Welcome to Country where relevant.

Actual outcomes

In practice, organisations that build on this understanding can expect to see:

- The correct Traditional Owners identified and engaged for the Country the organisation operates on.
- A Welcome to Country arranged with local Traditional Owners for significant events, and an Acknowledgement of Country offered respectfully at meetings and in documents.
- Cultural authority and permission respected when working on, or speaking about, a nation's Country, stories or knowledge.
- Accurate, strength-based language that recognises diversity, rather than treating First Nations peoples as one culture.
- Early and ongoing relationships with local Traditional Owners and community controlled organisations.

Key facts

Many nations	Hundreds of distinct nations, more than 250 represented on the AIATSIS map, with around 800 dialects.
Nations and clans	A nation is a group of people connected by language, Lore and Country. Within a nation are family and clan groups with their own responsibilities.
Country is living	Country includes lands, waters, skies and all living things, and it carries language, law, kinship and spirituality.
Boundaries	Boundaries follow landscape features, songlines and Lore. They do not match the colonial borders of states and territories.
Permission to enter	Travellers historically sought permission before entering another nation's Country, and this respect continues today.
Welcome and Acknowledgement	A Welcome to Country is given by Traditional Owners of that Country. An Acknowledgement of Country can be given by anyone.

The importance of permission to enter Country

For tens of thousands of years, people have moved across this continent for trade, ceremony, kinship and seasonal life. Movement was not free of protocol. To enter the Country of another nation, a person or group sought permission first. Messengers carried word ahead, sometimes with a message stick, and visitors would wait at the boundary to be met and welcomed onto Country. A Welcome could include being guided to safe places, sharing of resources, and ceremony such as a smoking ceremony for safe passage.

These protocols reflected deep principles of respect, reciprocity and Lore. Entering Country uninvited could breach Lore and place both visitor and host at risk. Seeking permission recognised the authority of the Traditional Owners over their Country and their responsibility to care for it and for those who travelled through it.

This is the foundation of the protocols used today. A Welcome to Country is offered by the Traditional Owners or Custodians of the Country you are on, welcoming visitors and offering safe passage in the spirit of the old protocols. An Acknowledgement of Country is offered by anyone, First Nations or non-Indigenous, to recognise and pay respect to the Traditional Owners of that Country. Practising these respectfully is a practical, everyday way of honouring permission and connection to Country.

Summary

Aboriginal Australia is a rich map of hundreds of nations, each with its own Country, language and Lore. Country is a living relationship, not simply an area of land, and entering another nation's Country has always called for permission and respect. These protocols continue today through Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country, and through respectful engagement with Traditional Owners. Recognising this diversity and these protocols is a foundation of culturally safe practice and genuine partnership.

Questions to reflect on

- Whose Country do you live and work on, and how do you know?
- How could your organisation seek permission and build relationships with the right Traditional Owners?
- Where could Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country be practised more meaningfully in your work?

Reference material

- **AIATSIS Map of Indigenous Australia** aiatsis.gov.au
- **AIATSIS, Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country** aiatsis.gov.au
- **Reconciliation Australia, Acknowledgement and Welcome** reconciliation.org.au
- **Common Ground, First Nations knowledge** commonground.org.au
- **National Agreement on Closing the Gap** closingthegap.gov.au

How Emus Talking can help

Emus Talking is a proudly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander owned business. We help organisations engage the right Traditional Owners, build cultural protocols, and create culturally safe workplaces and partnerships, delivered remotely and virtually across Australia, or in person by arrangement.

Mitch Amidy · mitch@emustalking.com.au · 0404 232 621 · sales@emustalking.com.au

Emus Talking Pty Ltd does not provide financial advice. This information is general in nature and should not be relied upon as a substitute for professional advice tailored to your circumstances. Cultural protocols vary between nations, and cultural knowledge belongs to the communities from which it comes and should be engaged with through local Traditional Owners.