

Toolkit

INDIGENOUS CULTURAL LANDSCAPES 101

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Introduction

Indigenous Cultural Landscapes (ICLs) represent the profound and ongoing relationships between Indigenous Peoples and their ancestral lands. These landscapes are not simply geographic places but are living, dynamic spaces imbued with cultural, spiritual, historical, and ecological significance. Unlike conventional cultural landscapes defined by Western frameworks, ICLs are shaped by Indigenous knowledge systems, values, and governance, reflecting Indigenous worldviews and self-determination.

Understanding ICLs is essential for respecting Indigenous sovereignty, preserving cultural heritage, and fostering meaningful collaboration in land stewardship and historic preservation. This document provides an overview of what Indigenous Cultural Landscapes are, how they differ from typical cultural sites, and best practices for research, consultation, and stewardship grounded in Indigenous protocols and values. It is not all-encompassing and should be understood as a working document that may evolve over time.

What is a Cultural Landscape?

A cultural landscape is a place that reveals the long-standing interaction between people and their environment. These landscapes are shaped by cultural practices, stories, spiritual connections, and livelihood strategies over time. The National Park Service (NPS) defines cultural landscapes as historically significant areas that reflect the influence of human culture on the land.

Cultural landscapes include:

- Historic sites (e.g., battlefields, village sites)
- Designed landscapes (e.g., gardens, parks)
- Vernacular landscapes (e.g., working farms or fishing camps)
- Ethnographic landscapes (e.g., sacred places still used today)

These places are valuable not only for their historical meaning but also for how they support living traditions, ecological knowledge, and community identity.

What is an Indigenous Cultural Landscape (ICL)?

An Indigenous Cultural Landscape (ICL) is a cultural landscape understood through Indigenous perspectives—shaped by Indigenous knowledge systems, values, and enduring relationships with land and water, as well as the living systems, cultures, and responsibilities sustained by these places. An ICL is not only a geographic location but also a living, storied, and spiritual space connected to Indigenous identity and well-being.

Key characteristics of ICLs:

- Reflect past, present, and future relationships with the land
- Deeply connected to language, ceremony, subsistence, and sacred knowledge
- May or may not contain physical evidence recognized in traditional historic preservation frameworks
- Emphasize continuity rather than fixed historical “periods of significance”

Unlike conventional cultural landscapes evaluated by National Register criteria alone, ICLs reflect Indigenous worldviews and require community-led definitions and documentation.

Background on Indigenous Cultural Landscapes: Standards of Practice and Applications of ICL Documentation

- *What approaches are taken to compile research and complete projects in this field of work?*

ICL research and project development is guided by a three-phase process: research, planning, and stewardship. These phases rely on Indigenous methodologies as well as established NPS cultural landscape practices.

- *Research*
 - Engage communities to gather oral histories, stories, traditional knowledge, and place-based narratives
 - Conduct fieldwork to document ecological, cultural, and historical features of the land
 - Use primary and secondary sources (e.g., historical maps, drawings, photos, community archives)
 - Assess climate data and environmental vulnerabilities to understand present-day risks
- *Planning*
 - Co-develop project goals with Nations, guided by values of self-determination and sovereignty
 - Use Cultural Landscape Reports (CLRs) and Cultural Landscape Inventories (CLIs) to identify key features, their significance, and integrity
 - Prioritize landscape elements for protection based on cultural value and climate vulnerability
 - Evaluate management options based on community input, available resources, and stewardship vision
- *Stewardship*
 - Implement actions such as preservation, interpretation, or ecological restoration
 - Monitor, test, and adapt strategies over time
 - Continue community engagement and accountability
 - Use the work to support Tribal historic preservation goals, federal recognitions, and public education

- *What does the work look like?*

ICL work is deeply collaborative and interdisciplinary, often including:

- Elder and youth engagement for knowledge sharing and education
- Story mapping to visually link places with meaning and memory
- Ecological and cultural documentation, using GIS, drone imaging, photography, and archival research
- Community-driven reporting, such as ICL narratives, digital maps, or interpretive displays
- Cultural protocols, such as ceremonies, language use, and gifting during fieldwork
- Final outputs may take many forms—such as reports, educational programs, exhibits, heritage designation applications, collaborative land use plans, or co-stewardship agreements.

- *Who should be included in the process?*

Consultation must be guided by Indigenous governance, cultural protocols, and informed consent. Those who should be included often vary by Nation, but generally include:

- Tribal governments (e.g., Councils, Chiefs, Historic Preservation Offices)
- Traditional Knowledge Holders and Elders who maintain deep relationships with the land
- Community members with lived experience, especially harvesters, hunters, and water protectors
- Cultural specialists or experts such as language keepers, storytellers, and spiritual leaders
- Youth and educators, ensuring intergenerational engagement
- Tribal liaisons or designated contact points, especially when working with federal, state, or NGO partners

Always follow Nation-specific consultation protocols. Consultation is a process of relationships and respect, not just a step in a checklist.

Additional Considerations: Recognition, Ethics, and Best Practices

What's the difference between an ICL and a typical historic site?

ICLs are defined by Indigenous peoples, not limited to the constructs of colonial history or built structures.

Can an ICL be recognized on the National Register of Historic Places?

Yes, though not all are. ICL documentation can inform nominations or stand alone as valuable records of cultural heritage.

What are ethical concerns in documenting ICLs?

A major area of concern is the extraction or misuse of sacred, ceremonial, or culturally sensitive information. Under this area of work, practice Indigenous data sovereignty and seek guidance on consent and knowledge sharing.

What does respectful data management look like in ICL work?

Research and utilize principles like Ownership, Control, Access and Possession (OCAP®) or the CARE

Principles for Indigenous Data Governance. Best practices include storing data with Nations when possible, ensuring community control, and creating data sharing agreements.

Why does ICL documentation matter beyond the research phase, and how can it support Indigenous and collaborative priorities on the land?

ICL work supports multiple outcomes:

Tribal sovereignty	Supports recognition of sacred places and governance of ancestral lands
Historic preservation	Informs National Register nominations and other legal recognitions
Interpretation and education	Helps the public understand Indigenous histories and relationships to land
Climate resilience	Integrates traditional ecological knowledge into landscape adaptation planning
Federal partnerships	Guides agencies in respectful, informed co-management of public lands

Additional Resources

- NPS Cultural Landscapes Program, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/culturallandscapes>
- NPS Cultural Landscapes 101, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/cultural-landscapes-101.htm>
- NPS Report Collection Spotlight: Cultural Landscape Reports, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/phscl-collection-spotlight-cultural-landscape-reports.htm>
- NPS Understand Cultural Landscapes, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/culturallandscapes/understand-cl.htm>
- NPS: Setting the Scene: A Guide to Cultural Landscapes, <https://home.nps.gov/articles/setting-the-scene-a-guide-to-cultural-landscapes.htm>
- NPS Cultural Landscape Reports & Inventories, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/phscl-collection-spotlight-cultural-landscape-reports.htm>
- NPS Cultural Landscapes Reports & References, <https://nps.gov/subjects/culturallandscapes/references.htm>
- NPS Indigenous Cultural Landscapes Overview - Captain John Smith Trail, <https://www.nps.gov/cajo/learn/indigenous-cultural-landscapes.htm>
- Guidance for Characterizing Tribal Cultural Landscapes (BOEM), <https://www.boem.gov/sites/default/files/environmental-stewardship/Environmental-Studies/Pacific-Region/Studies/BOEM-2015-047.pdf>