



# EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

OFFICE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY POLICY


COUNCIL ON ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

WASHINGTON, D.C.



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## MEMORANDUM FOR THE HEADS OF DEPARTMENTS AND AGENCIES

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SUBJECT: Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Federal Decision Making

### Background

President Biden is committed to strengthening the relationship between the Federal Government and Tribal Nations and to advancing equity for Indigenous people, including Native Americans, Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiians, and Indigenous peoples of the U.S. territories.<sup>1</sup> These commitments include ensuring that Federal agencies conduct regular, meaningful, and robust consultation with Tribal officials in the development of federal research, policies, and decisions, especially decisions that may affect Tribal Nations and the people they represent.

Consistent with the Administration's additional commitment to scientific integrity and knowledge- and evidence-based policymaking,<sup>2</sup> the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) and the White House Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) issue this memorandum to recognize Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge (ITEK)—a form of Indigenous Knowledge<sup>3</sup>—as one of the many important bodies of knowledge that contributes to the scientific, technical, social, and economic advancements of the United States and to our collective understanding of the natural world.

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<sup>1</sup> Memorandum on Tribal Consultation and Strengthening Nation-to-Nation Relationships, 86 Fed. Reg. 7,491 (Jan. 26, 2021); Executive Order 13,985: Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government, 86 Fed. Reg. 7,009 (Jan. 20, 2021); Executive Order 14,031: Advancing Equity, Justice, and Opportunity for Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders, 86 Fed. Reg. 29,675 (May 28, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Memorandum on Restoring Trust in Government Through Scientific Integrity and Evidence-Based Policymaking (Jan. 27, 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/27/memorandum-on-restoring-trust-in-government-through-scientific-integrity-and-evidence-based-policymaking/>.

<sup>3</sup> A variety of terms and definitions are used by knowledge holders, Indigenous people, Tribal organizations, and government bodies to refer to this body of knowledge or related concepts, including "Indigenous Knowledge," "Indigenous Knowledges," and "Traditional and Indigenous Knowledge." This memorandum will use "Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge," or "ITEK," to refer to Indigenous Knowledge that pertains to ecology and the environment, although OSTP and CEQ intend to seek input on the appropriate terms to use in this context.

ITEK is a body of observations, oral and written knowledge, practices, and beliefs that promote environmental sustainability and the responsible stewardship of natural resources through relationships between humans and environmental systems. It is applied to phenomena across biological, physical, cultural and spiritual systems. ITEK has evolved over millennia, continues to evolve, and includes insights based on evidence acquired through direct contact with the environment and long-term experiences, as well as extensive observations, lessons, and skills passed from generation to generation. ITEK is owned by Indigenous people—including, but not limited to, Tribal Nations, Native Americans, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians.<sup>4</sup>

The Federal Government has previously received requests to develop guidance for Federal agencies on how to partner with Tribal Nations and Native organizations regarding the application of ITEK.<sup>5</sup> The Administration recognizes that the Federal Government should engage with ITEK only through relationships with Tribal Nations and Native communities and in a manner that respects the rights of knowledge holders to control access to their knowledge, to grant or withhold permission, and to dictate the terms of its application. It further recognizes that, should Tribal Nations and Native communities decide to share ITEK and otherwise collaborate with the Federal Government, the Federal Government should ensure that the application of that knowledge and complementary collaborative efforts benefit Tribal Nations, Native communities, the United States, and our planet.

With these principles in mind, OSTP and CEQ are initiating a process to develop government-wide guidance for Federal agencies on ITEK, with Tribal consultation and drawing on the important work that has already occurred at a number of agencies and within Tribal Nations and Native communities. This memorandum is the first step in that process, which will be shaped by the input of Tribal Nations, ITEK holders and practitioners, Federal agency experts, and the public.

## **Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Federal Decision Making**

Where appropriate, ITEK can and should inform Federal decision making along with scientific inquiry. Indeed, the Fourth National Climate Assessment recognized and incorporated ITEK as an important information source for improving the understanding of climate change and environmental sustainability over time, and for developing comprehensive climate adaptation and natural resource management strategies.<sup>6</sup> As the examples provided at the end of this memorandum show, Tribal Nations and Native communities have already worked effectively

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, *Traditional Ecological Knowledge Fact Sheet* (Feb. 2011), <https://www.fws.gov/nativeamerican/pdf/tek-fact-sheet.pdf>; Inuit Circumpolar Council, *Indigenous Knowledge*, <https://www.inuitcircumpolar.com/icc-activities/environment-sustainable-development/indigenous-knowledge/>.

<sup>5</sup> National Congress of American Indians, *Request for Federal Government to Develop Guidance on Recognizing Tribal Sovereign Jurisdiction over Traditional Knowledge* (2013), <https://www.ncai.org/resources/resolutions/request-for-federal-government-to-develop-guidance-on-recognizing-tribal-sovereign-jurisdiction-over-traditional-knowledge>.

<sup>6</sup> Fourth National Climate Assessment, *Tribes and Indigenous Peoples*, Volume II, Chapter 15 (2018), [https://nca2018.globalchange.gov/downloads/NCA4\\_Ch15\\_Tribes-and-Indigenous-Peoples\\_Full.pdf](https://nca2018.globalchange.gov/downloads/NCA4_Ch15_Tribes-and-Indigenous-Peoples_Full.pdf).

with Federal agencies to incorporate ITEK into knowledge- and evidence-based Federal Government decision making, and such collaborations have been mutually beneficial.

The guidance that OSTP and CEQ plan to develop—with Federal agency collaboration, robust and meaningful Tribal consultation, and input from ITEK holders and practitioners and the public—will include best practices on how to collaborate with Tribal Nations and Native communities around ITEK application to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes, how to address Federal Government-wide challenges around ITEK such as navigating Federal laws and interagency processes, and how to appropriately respect the knowledge holders’ rights to decline participation in efforts to collaborate. The guidance will be designed to complement, not supplant, existing agency guidance related to ITEK and will build on past efforts to recognize and incorporate ITEK into Federal scientific and policy decisions.

### **Establishment of Interagency Working Group**

OSTP and CEQ will begin in 2021 by developing pathways for Tribal and Native community input and convening an interagency working group to inform the development of the guidance. This “Interagency Working Group on Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge” will include representatives from agencies across the Federal Government. The purpose of the working group is to enhance interagency collaboration and coordination, draw on agency experience, and address significant issues as they arise. The Interagency Working Group on Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge will prepare the guidance document for planned release in 2022.

OSTP and CEQ look forward to collaborating with Tribal Nations and Native communities to apply ITEK in a way that benefits people and the planet and facilitates a holistic understanding of the world.

## **APPENDIX: Supporting Examples of ITEK Application and Collaboration Between Native Communities and the Federal Government, Written With Native Partners**

The Administration recognizes that, for generations, Federal policies have systematically sought to assimilate and displace Indigenous people and to eradicate Indigenous cultures. The below examples are intended not to erase this history, but to illustrate the kinds of mutually beneficial collaborations that are possible. These examples include input from and reflect the perspectives of the Native organizations, individuals, and agencies involved in these particular efforts.

- Coastal Indian Tribes, including the Cowlitz Indian Tribe, have fished and traded for eulachon in tributaries of the Columbia River since time immemorial. NOAA and the Cowlitz Indian Tribe—who initiated the project—applied Tribal oral histories to reconstruct historic distributions of the eulachon, a species of fish.<sup>7</sup> Those Cowlitz Tribal oral histories aided in identification of key spawning habitat, timing of eulachon runs, and run differences between tributaries and directly informed NOAA’s decision to list a population segment as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.<sup>8</sup> The project facilitated joint efforts to identify and protect critical habitat, increase abundance of the species, and promote species recovery.<sup>9</sup>
- In Acadia National Park, the National Park Service is working with citizens of Wabanaki Tribes—the Aroostook Band of Micmacs, the Houlton Band of Maliseets, the Passamaquoddy Tribe at Sipayak, the Passamaquoddy Tribe at Indian Township, and the Penobscot Indian Nation—on shared governance and research on sweetgrass harvesting.<sup>10</sup> Wabanaki people have harvested sweetgrass for generations. Research in Acadia, guided by Indigenous methodologies, reinforces what Wabanaki people have always known: that harvesting sweetgrass through a Wabanaki philosophy enhances sweetgrass abundance. Wabanaki knowledge, and the gatherers who generate this knowledge, are leading NPS research and management strategies that will enable restoration of Wabanaki harvesting within Acadia National Park.<sup>11</sup>
- For Native Hawaiians, cultural heritage and the natural world are valued as one. At Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, this ancestral, cultural, and natural significance are on an equal platform with all other

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<sup>7</sup> Nathan Reynolds, Marc Romano, *Traditional Ecological Knowledge: Reconstructing Historical Run Timing and Spawning Distribution of Eulachon through Tribal Oral History*, *Journal of Northwest Anthropology* (2013).

<sup>8</sup> National Marine Fisheries Service, *Recovery Plan for the Southern Distinct Population Segment of Eulachon*, (Sept. 2017), <https://repository.library.noaa.gov/view/noaa/15989>.

<sup>9</sup> NOAA Fisheries, National Ocean Service, *Guidance and Best Practices for Engaging and Incorporating Traditional Ecological Knowledge in Decision-Making* (May 2019), <https://www.legislative.noaa.gov/docs/19-065933-Traditional-Knowledge-in-Decision-Making-Documents-Signed.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Forest Service Southern Research Station, *Traditional Ecological Knowledge Helps Researchers Understand the Effects of Plant Harvesting* (2018), <https://srs.fs.usda.gov/research/2018-research-highlights/highlight.php?id=traditional-knowledge>.

<sup>11</sup> Abbe Museum, *Wabanaki Sweetgrass Harvesting in Acadia National Park* (June 1, 2019), <https://www.abbemuseum.org/blog/2018/6/21/a8ox8s8wxde6nenklfm77gayl60h87>.

interests.<sup>12</sup> The monument is co-managed by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the State of Hawai'i Office of Hawaiian Affairs, and the Hawai'i Department of Land and Natural Resources, and Native Hawaiians have consistently led the development and governance of the monument. Its management is based on Indigenous Hawaiian Knowledge and management practices, as expressed in the recent release of *Mai Ka Pō Mai*, a historic guidance document that will help federal and state agencies further integrate Native Hawaiian culture into all aspects of management.<sup>13</sup>

- The Inupiat, St. Lawrence Island Yupik, Central Yup'ik and Cup'ik peoples have lived in the Northern Bering Sea region for millennia interconnected with marine and coastal ecosystems. Tribes, regional Alaska native non-profit organizations, Elders and Traditional Knowledge holders from across the northern Bering Sea region worked with the Federal government over concerns about rapid climate change and the need for solutions that take a whole-of-government approach that build equity in decision-making for the Northern Bering Sea region. The Northern Bering Sea Climate Resilience Area, established by Executive Order 13,754 in 2016, and reinstated by President Biden in 2021, provides an example of Indigenous values informing policy and the potential for including Traditional Knowledge in decision-making.<sup>14</sup> It provides a model for bridging different value systems coming from Indigenous Knowledge and academic science through a framework that includes a federal task force and Bering Intergovernmental Tribal Advisory Council. The task force and advisory council are charged with conserving the region's ecosystem, including those natural resources that provide important food security to the people of the region. It also provides a pathway for Tribal voices that have been historically underserved in decision-making processes.

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<sup>12</sup> Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, *2020 State of the Monument Report* (2020), <https://sanctuaries.noaa.gov/science/condition/pmnm/welcome.html>

<sup>13</sup> Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, *Integrating Native Hawaiian Culture into Management of Papahānaumokuākea* (June 21, 2021), <https://www.papahanaumokuakea.gov/new-news/2021/06/21/maikapomai/>.

<sup>14</sup> Executive Order 13,754: Northern Bering Sea Climate Resilience, 81 Fed. Reg. 90,669 (Dec. 9, 2016); Press Release: Biden-Harris Administration Brings Arctic Policy to the Forefront (Sept. 24, 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/ostp/news-updates/2021/09/24/biden-harris-administration-brings-arctic-policy-to-the-forefront-with-reactivated-steering-committee-new-slate-of-research-commissioners/>.