

Indigenous Peoples Terminology for the Fourth National Climate Assessment

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This list of terms was an attempt by various Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors and experts of the U.S. Fourth National Climate Assessment (NCA4) to clarify the use of terms relating to tribesⁱ and Indigenous peoples. Our goal was to explain what authors meant as they were using the terms and to try maintaining some consistency in the usage of terms, when appropriate, across chapters. This document is not definitive or exhaustive but should instead act as a starting place and a reference guide. We acknowledge that, in practice, tribes and Indigenous peoples across the United States may employ or define these terms differently. Ultimately, a tribal member or Indigenous person referring to specific contexts and places is the ultimate authority of these phrases and concepts. We advised NCA4 Chapter Leads to defer to their regional experts in deciding which terms and definitions are most appropriate for their respective regions.

Indigenous peoples are culturally and politically self-determining groups whose right to self-determination in North America and Hawai'i/ the Pacific Islands began before the establishment of the United States.

Subsistence, taken broadly, refers to any human system that seeks to secure survival and flourish within particular ecosystems. In some legal and policy contexts, the term may be used more narrowly to refer to the provision of food that is a necessary part of a household's or a community's regular diet or legal entitlements to harvesting rights in particular situations. In some contexts, **subsistence** means the harvest or use of naturally-produced renewable resources for direct personal or family consumption as food, shelter, fuel, clothing, tools, transportation, or production of handicrafts for customary and traditional trade, barter, or sharing.

Indigenous knowledges, in brief, refers to Indigenous peoples' systems of observing, monitoring, researching, recording, communicating, and learning that are required, as for any group, to support survival and flourishing in an ecosystem and the social adaptive capacity to adjust to or prepare for changes.

Frontline communities are those that experience climate change first and often feel the worst effects. They are communities that have higher exposures, are more sensitive, and are less able to adapt to climate change impacts for a variety of reasons.

Indian, as in the case of “American Indian Nations” or the “Bureau of Indian Affairs” or in “Indian Tribes,” is a concept in the U.S. that refers to “Indigenous.” Historically “Indian” is widely used in U.S. law and policy.

Sovereignty is used to express “political self-determination” (e.g., self-government) of Indigenous peoples in North America and Hawai'i/the Pacific Islands.

Tribal lands is a general term that could refer to several land types/arrangements, e.g., Federal Indian Reservation, allotted lands, restricted status/restricted fee, or ceded territories/ancestral territories.

Ceded territories refers to several types of land, but most commonly, it refers to land that Indigenous peoples ceded to the U.S. as part of a treaty, yet in the treaty agreement the Indigenous peoples retained rights to hunt, fish, gather, and/or worship in some or all of the ceded areas.

Self-determination means the right of peoples to freely determine their own political status and pursue their economic, social, and cultural development.

Treaty rights are a result of the “contracts among nations” between Indigenous peoples and the U.S. that recognize and establish entitlements, benefits, and conditions for the specific parties.

Colonialism is a form of domination in which at least one society exerts power to enable its capacity to exploit one or more other societies in order to gain some set of goods the former society perceives as valuable to the fulfillment of its economic, social, and cultural development.

Settler colonialism is a type of colonial domination in which the colonizing societies seek to obtain valuable goods by permanently inhabiting the territories that one or more other societies already inhabit (i.e., Indigenous peoples). Many settler colonial processes involve the colonizing society working to erase the presence and history of the Indigenous peoples.

The **Federal Indian Trust Responsibility** is a legal obligation under which the U.S. “has charged itself with moral obligations of the highest responsibility and trust” toward federally-recognized tribes. This responsibility is also “a legally enforceable fiduciary obligation on the part of the U.S. to protect tribal treaty rights, lands, assets, and resources.”

Historical trauma is the issue that people whose ancestors experienced severe disruptions in their lives often experience greater risks (e.g., health risks) than people whose ancestors did not undergo those experiences and traumas. Examples of the historical disruptions include war, violence, forced assimilation, and deprivation of homelands, cultural integrity, social respect, and political sovereignty.

ⁱ When writing the word “tribe” (or “tribes”) it is not capitalized, unless referring to a specific tribe or tribes.