

TRIBAL ENGAGEMENT IN WASHINGTON STATE

As wildfire practitioners and residents of Washington, it is our responsibility to recognize that fire has been used on the land here for thousands of years. As we work to build wildfire resilience in our state, partnerships with the Tribal Nations that been stewards of the land since time immemorial are vital.

In the Spring of 2025, WAFAC hosted a Tribal Engagement Training, led by The Whitener Group, a Native-owned consultant group. The objectives for the training were twofold:

1. Increase participants' knowledge of the history of Indigenous peoples nationally and in Washington State
2. Understand what it takes to successfully engage with tribes in Washington

Session 1: Treaty Talks

Hon. Ron Whitener (Squaxin Island Tribe), retired chief judge of the Tulalip Tribes and Indian Law Professor, covered the history of tribal sovereignty and treaty rights in the U.S., with a focus on Washington State. This session examined colonization, the Marshall Trilogy, treaty-making, and key legal battles over fishing, hunting, and land rights. It also provided guidance on working with tribal governments and fostering respectful collaboration.

Session 2: Working with Tribal Governments Today

Bob Whitener (Squaxin Island Tribe) and Jennifer Whitener Ulrich discussed the key aspects of effective tribal engagement, including tips for creating long-lasting relationships with tribal governments in Washington State. They shared common challenges, strategies for building trust, and how to avoid “landmines.”

LESSONS LEARNED

There is great diversity in governance, experience, and viewpoints among Indigenous peoples and nations throughout Washington. Tribes have differing opinions from one another and within their own communities, do not automatically assume uniformity and consensus.

Tribes are not “stakeholders.” Tribes are sovereign nations and need to be consulted as such. Tribal consultation is a formal government-to-government dialogue between tribal and federal representatives; it should take place before involving stakeholders and interest groups.

Know when the election cycles are. This can help determine when you might want to engage with a newly elected governing body.

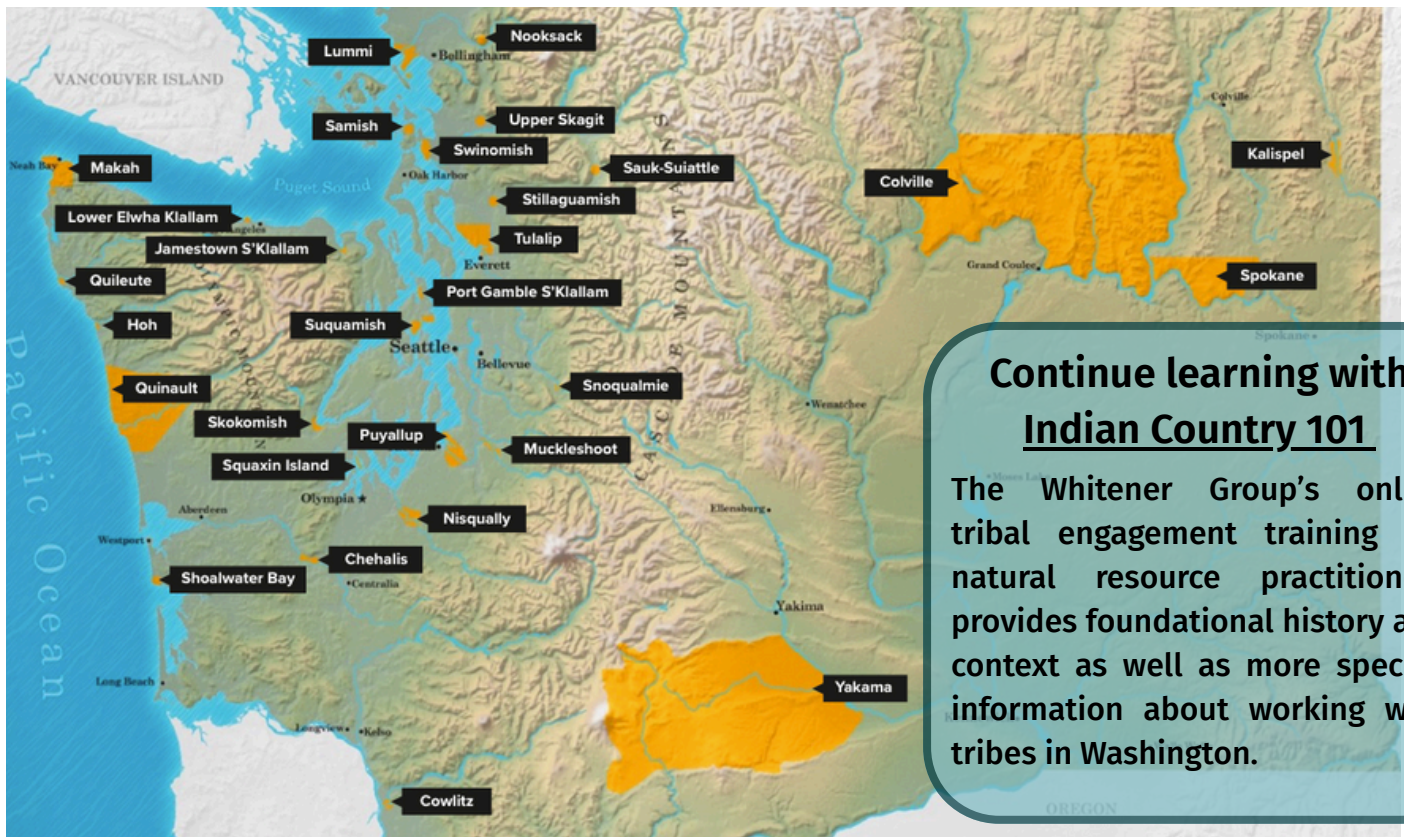
Tribal governments have a political relationship with the U.S. government that does not derive from race or ethnicity. While specific Indigenous groups and people may identify with various ethnicities, when it comes to engaging with tribes for the sake of natural resources work, you are engaging with a political group and governing body with sovereign rights.

Understand federal recognition. Whether a tribe is federally recognized or not will likely impact how you engage. There are 29 federally recognized tribes in Washington.

Learn how a community refers to itself as a group of people.

Familiarize yourself with the Four Cs of tribal engagement: Consultation, Communication, Consent, and Commitment.

Understanding the historical context of tribal relations with the United States is vital to respectful and effective partnership. Take time to educate yourself.



Federally recognized tribes in Washington. washingtribes.org.