Honoring and Resourcing Native Communities to Lead the Climate Fight

A Call to Action for Philanthropy
The Climate and Clean Energy Equity Fund (Equity Fund) is building power to stop climate change and create an equitable clean energy future through a strategic multi-state initiative that is:

» Investing in the leadership and organizing of diverse communities (Black and Indigenous people, people of color, and others bearing the brunt of climate change);

» Engaging voters in these communities through nonpartisan civic engagement campaigns; and

» Winning climate and clean energy policy solutions that reflect the priorities of communities and advance racial, economic, and environmental justice.

The Equity Fund’s Policy Accelerator and Communications Accelerator provide targeted resources and technical assistance to support frontline partners to build vital movement capacity and infrastructure to advance climate and clean energy policy solutions that reflect the priorities of their communities.

Learn more about the Equity Fund or contact us at hello@theequityfund.org.
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Land Acknowledgment

The Climate and Clean Energy Equity Fund (Equity Fund) acknowledges the Native lands that we sit on and the Indigenous Peoples who inhabit them. Of over 574 federally-recognized tribal nations, and many that are not federally recognized across Turtle Island, the Equity Fund has remote offices on land belonging to seven of these Native Peoples: Piscataway, Nacotchtank (Anacostan), Monacan Nation, Tongva Nation, Ohlone Lands, Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community and the Gila River Indian Community. This land acknowledgment is a humble indication of our commitment to solidarity with Indigenous and Native communities.

Indigenous Peoples are not a monolith - there are many people from various nations, communities, and tribes with different cultural practices, beliefs, values and understandings of the world. This report shares the experiences and knowledge of the Native leaders we interviewed. Please note we use “Native” and “Indigenous” interchangeably because this report is U.S.-centric and most Indigenous Peoples that write about Indigeneity in North America use both terms.
About the Equity Fund and Our Role in this Work

Founded in 2016, the Climate and Clean Energy Equity Fund (Equity Fund) is a leading U.S. funding initiative that invests in grassroots organizations to support their ability to build power for climate and clean energy equity and racial and economic justice across the country.

The Equity Fund’s commitment to supporting those on the frontlines of the climate crisis, the climate justice movement’s natural overlap with many Native-led climate strategies, and the importance of the decisiveness of the Native vote, has led us to explore how to strengthen our funding model to best serve the needs of Native grassroots leaders. In order to do so, we embarked on this research to better understand the landscape of Native climate organizing in the US. One of the considerations at the onset of this project was that our state-based model may not adequately fit the needs or be suitable for Native organizations working in tribal nations. We are committed to utilizing this report to question and improve our grantmaking practices at the Equity Fund and invite other climate funders to do the same.
Introduction

Native Peoples have experienced environmental racism and devastation for generations but contribute the least to climate change. Indigenous communities are often the most negatively impacted by environmental destruction. Native leaders are fighting on the frontlines for environmental justice. Indigenous practices offer healing and sustainable alternatives to land and resource exploitation. But funding to Indigenous-led organizations is not equitable.

This report outlines the complex problems facing Native communities and specifically the challenges for Indigenous-led organizations addressing climate change. We share in this report ways for funders to develop and deepen relationships with Native-led nonprofits and to support their community organizing and advocacy efforts.

The Equity Fund engaged in research for this report (interviews with 34 Native and non-Native leaders) to strengthen our grantmaking and to share with other funders what we learned. Our findings reinforce our understanding that Indigenous Peoples are on the frontlines of climate injustice. The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues states that Native Peoples “are among the first to face the direct consequences of climate change, owing to their dependence upon, and close relationship with the environment and its resources... even though Indigenous Peoples contribute the least to greenhouse emissions... Climate change [has] exacerbated the difficulties already faced by vulnerable Indigenous communities, including political and economic marginalization, loss of land and resources, human rights violations, discrimination and unemployment.”

As Crystal EchoHawk with IllumiNative told us, “[our] communities are canaries in the coalmine,” experiencing the effects of climate change first. This is precisely why they must be at the forefront of the movement for climate justice.

Indigenous Peoples are the original stewards of the land, holding important history and deep knowledge of how to be caretakers of our Mother Earth. They offer alternatives to capitalistic and white patriarchal systems that contribute to the exploitation and misuse of natural resources. Native solutions to the climate crisis strike a sustainable balance between economic development, community benefit and harmonious relationship with the natural world. In many cases, though, non-Native allies do not recognize Indigenous knowledge - including climate solutions.

For example, Laurie Weahkee of Diné, Cochiti and Zuni Pueblo shared that “leave it (uranium) in the ground is often overlooked by our allies, who think of nuclear energy as clean energy.”

“People need to recognize Native People aren’t just protecting land, water, and air for themselves. The work they are doing benefits humanity.”

- Natasha K. Hale with the W.K. Kellogg Foundation

Sustaining and growing the Native movement in general and climate justice advocacy in particular has been challenging. This is due, in part, to the obstacles of organizing on tribal lands, including spotty or non-existent cell phone and internet service, and the need to travel great distances on poorly-maintained roads. Most importantly, Native organizations are chronically underfunded. While the 2020 Census found that the American Indian and Alaska Natives population in the USA is 1.3%, funding for Indigenous Peoples and causes in the United States is only 0.3% of total giving. It is important to note that the true number of Native people in the USA is likely much higher than what is reported in the Census.

Native people are also severely underrepresented in the nonprofit field - including philanthropy- and often are invited to join organizations or coalitions as token members rather than as leaders. According to a 2018 study conducted by Dorceta E. Taylor of Yale’s School of the Environment, white people comprised more than 80% of board members and 85% of staff of the 2,057 environmental nonprofit organizations she surveyed. Only 12.5% of those organizations have Native American board members and only 10.7% have Native American staff. Similarly, in climate-related philanthropy, only a few Indigenous People are involved in grant decision-making processes.
One funder we interviewed commented, “If institutions that are funded are white, how will they be held accountable to their grantee partners of color? This won’t happen unless you have program officers who are people of color. There are so many white people in these [decision-making] meetings and they just don’t understand [the reality that Indigenous Peoples face].”

To be equitable and effective, climate action funders need to acknowledge and respond to the disparity in resources given to organizations that are led by and for Indigenous communities and communities of color. The Equity Fund’s grantmaking demonstrates that incorporating a racial justice lens to climate change funding results in bolder climate solutions that improve people’s lives, reduce emissions, and build the political power to create a transformational economic future.

This report builds on the Equity Fund’s commitment to support the leadership of Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC)-led grassroots organizations in the movement for climate and energy equity. The Equity Fund is committed to applying the recommendations laid out in this report to improve our grantmaking practices and serve the needs of Native grassroots leaders. We invite fellow climate funders to do the same.
Resistance and Resilience: Conditions in Native Communities

Native communities have a long history of adapting to changing conditions and challenging circumstances, while still maintaining vibrant communities and social progress. In this section, we provide only a snapshot of some of the major social, cultural and environmental challenges many Native People currently face in order to contextualize the organizing and advocacy efforts of Native grassroots leaders. We hope this brief context will provide a basic understanding of Native resistance and resilience, will help non-Native funders understand why and how Native organizations approach climate work, and provide a basis for designing grantmaking programs that account for the realities of Native communities.

The United States’ long-standing and ongoing history of colonization and violence against Indigenous Peoples and their lands is at the root of Native communities’ challenges. From dehumanization and racism to disregard of Indigenous natural resource management strategies, Native Peoples confront and work against harms that impact them daily.

Erasure of Native Peoples.

Native history and people in the United States have been largely erased from Americans’ consciousness. Many non-Native people are unaware that Indigenous Peoples still exist or that the land we occupy is Indigenous territory. At best, non-Native people incorrectly perceive Indigenous Peoples as a monolith. Erasure of Native Peoples is a centuries-long intentional practice of negligence and violence, including genocide and attempts to force Native Peoples to assimilate into Western culture through abusive boarding schools. A 2015 Pennsylvania State University study found that 87% of the content taught about Native Americans in U.S. schools includes only pre-1900s history. Twenty-seven states did not include a Native American individual in their history teaching standards. This erasure of Native People and history has permeated the climate movement, evident by the fact that, by and large, environmental organizations and funders do not seek out Native Peoples for leadership positions or grant opportunities. One grassroots leader shared their belief that the “conservation sector is racist and completely erases traditional knowledge stewardship and ecological knowledge.”

Dehumanization of Indigenous Peoples.

The appropriation and trivialization of Native Peoples’ cultures is pervasive and contributes greatly to their dehumanization. A prominent example is athletic team names and mascots featuring racist caricatures of Native Peoples. Indigenous-led groups across the country are fighting against the use of racist team names and mascots. Additionally, each year multiple media outlets include stories about the problematic sale and use of Native American costumes. Non-Natives profit from the appropriation of Native cultures, further harming Indigenous People.
Underinvestment in Native Peoples.

» **High Rates of Poverty and Homelessness:** According to a report by the National Congress of American Indians, the overall poverty level in 2017 for Native Peoples was 26.8%, compared to a national rate of 4.6%. Native Americans are overrepresented in the population of unsheltered people by a factor of 12, and Native Americans are 26 times more likely to experience homelessness than white people.

» **Lack of Access to Water and Power:** One way Native Peoples experience poverty in the U.S. is through lack of access to water, electricity, and the internet on tribal lands. More than 15,000 homes (or 27%) in the Navajo Nation lack electricity, accounting for 75% of all unelectrified homes in the US, according to the American Public Power Association. In addition, according to Dig Deep and the U.S. Water Alliance, “Native Americans are more likely to experience water access issues than any other group: 58 out of every 1,000 Native American households lack complete plumbing, as opposed to three out of every 1,000 [non-Native] households.”

» **Climate-related Food Inaccessibility and Insecurity:** Kendra Kloster at Native Peoples Action explains that fish in Alaska are not only dying at an alarming rate because of drastically warming waters, but they are perishing before they can spawn, impacting salmon reproduction for future generations. Additionally, waterways that have historically been frozen throughout the winter are thawing before spring, causing dangerous hunting conditions and increased instances of people falling through the ice. According to Kloster, “[This] directly impacts [our] way of life, food sources and ultimately our connection to our ways of life as they are all connected.”

» **Impacts of COVID:** The devastating impacts of COVID-19, exacerbated by government disregard for vulnerable populations, have rippled through Native communities. In 2020, the CDC reported that the COVID-19 mortality rate among Native Americans was 1.8 times higher than among non-Hispanic Whites. Early in the pandemic, infection rates and deaths were disproportionately high in the Navajo Nation. Thankfully, vaccinations have substantially helped Indigenous communities across the country, but not soon enough, as thousands of Native Peoples have already died.
Violence Against Indigenous Peoples.

Police brutality is more prevalent against Native Americans than against non-Natives. Although there is very limited data on people killed by the police, The Guardian found that in 2016 police killed 10.13 Native Americans per million people, in comparison to 6.66 Black people per million, and 2.9 White people per million. Gender-based violence is also a major problem in virtually all Native communities. The Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Relatives (MMIWG) movement highlights the unthinkably high numbers of Native women, girls and non-binary people who go missing and are murdered daily. In 2016 alone, there were 5,712 MMIWG cases. The connection between the number of MMIWG and oil and gas infrastructure development is well documented.

Violence Against Native Lands and Territories.

Rich in natural resources but poor in economic opportunities, many Tribal communities have become the sites of environmental violence. Many Native lands are energy sacrifice zones, areas where fossil fuel extraction and production result in unhealthy ecosystems and even life-threatening homes for Native Peoples. Violence to the land, water, and air manifests in toxic waste sites, coal power plants, incinerators, intrusive projects, mining, and sacred site destruction. Consequences of this violence include massive fires, degraded water quality and land toxicity, erosion, and major droughts. Environmental violence towards Native lands is a centuries' long tradition resulting from and made almost impermeable by colonization, settler colonialism, white supremacy, capitalism, and other dangerous systems. As Beverly Harry with Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada shared, "We don't have respect for the land. We don't care about the way we are digging into different ecosystems. The eco-systems have attacked us back and are telling us to be careful where we are digging. These areas belong to particular natural systems, not to people."

Mistrust of the U.S. Government.

Given centuries of governmental oppression — broken treaties, environmental injustice, violence, and genocide — Indigenous communities distrust the U.S. government. Government policies have resulted in millions of Native People’s lives harmed or lost, lands stolen, families ripped apart, cultures and languages nearly extinguished, water commodified, land and water claims invalidated, and plants and animals Native Peoples relied on for food gone extinct. Throughout history, the U.S. government has acted in bad faith, breaking nearly all treaties with Native Peoples. Ongoing disrespect for tribal land sovereignty only contributes to the mistrust Native Peoples feel towards the federal government.

Accessibility Challenges.

Many Native Peoples live in rural areas. Organizing in these communities is challenging. One grassroots leader shared the wish that “funders realized how rural [we] are. Going to every meeting is a big expense and [we] don't have internet. Sometimes [we] have to drive 2-3 hours for a meeting to talk to someone for an hour.” Lacking easy access to the Internet and airports, and coping with underdeveloped roads, leaders of rural Native organizations face unique challenges connecting with funders and collaborators. At the same time, Janeen Comenote with the National Urban Indian Family Coalition reminded us not to forget urban Natives. Even less information is available about urban Natives than the scant data on rural Natives. Janeen shared that disinformation “about the Indian way of life is harmful [to Indigenous People] and creates damaging stereotypes that echo in realms [outside of philanthropy]."

Impacts of Historical Trauma.

The historical trauma Indigenous Peoples have contended with for generations resonates throughout many Native communities. It manifests in disproportionately high suicide rates, incredibly high incarceration rates, and tremendous needs for mental health and drug and alcohol addiction programs. Enei Begaye with Native Movement shares that "historical trauma is very real and can be amplified.” She and her colleagues work with individuals dealing with intra community violence, family trauma, and mental health challenges. Consequently, part of her work focuses on intentional healing that will not unintentionally create more harm.

“Disinformation about the Indian way of life is harmful [to Indigenous people] and creates damaging stereotypes that echo in realms [outside of philanthropy].”

– Janeen Comenote from National Urban Indian Family Coalition
Rejuvenation and Respect: Indigenous People’s Vision for the Future

Many Native Peoples are strengthening and restoring their cultural practices which are deeply intertwined with values of environmental stewardship. They are working to secure a strong, healthy future for their communities, often thinking of their impact seven generations into the future. Below we describe components of the world the Native leaders we interviewed envision for their people.

Sovereignty and Self-Determination.

Native Peoples’ self-determination and sovereignty over their land is of utmost importance. Many interviewees noted that sovereign nations are better equipped to address environmental challenges, restore lands by utilizing their ancestral knowledge, and preserve their languages and cultures. Native sovereignty is not only important for Native Peoples but for non-Natives as well; the prosperity of Sovereign nations ripples out and increases the prosperity of those around them.

Honoring and Protecting Indigenous Wisdom and Knowledge.

Native knowledge and wisdom deserve protection and honor. But the erasure of Indigenous languages and concepts has, for example, led to the environmental movement appropriating “Mother Earth” as a metaphor rather than what many Native Peoples know she truly is: a relative. In some spaces “nature” is used to describe Mother Earth. This is due to the whitewashing of Indigenous language and Natives being forced to make their voices more “palatable” for non-Natives. Protecting Native knowledge and wisdom would, in the analysis of the World Intellectual Property Organization, “enable Indigenous and local communities as well as governments to have a say over the use of their traditional knowledge by others. This would make it possible, for instance, to protect traditional remedies and Indigenous art and music against appropriation, and enable communities to control and benefit collectively from their commercial exploitation.”

Accurate Media Representations.

Creating a world in which Native Peoples are not only represented but revered and supported requires strong media and communications efforts. To build the understanding, support, and traction needed for sweeping societal changes, the general public needs to hear the stories of Indigenous Peoples. Due to America’s intentional erasure of Indigenous Peoples and their history, educating and reframing the way non-Natives talk about Native Peoples is an important first move. Changing public perceptions of Indigenous Peoples will impact climate justice efforts. As Crystal Echohawk from IllumiNative shared, “[Communications] work is about amplifying stories that include climate and energy. It helps push increased media coverage, pitch stories, and build the capacity of Native leaders on cultural change. Telling [these] stories can help advance necessary policy and systems change and reach new audiences.”

Research and Data Collection Capacity.

Multiple Native grassroots leaders shared concerns that water, air, and land pollution are creating long-term but unstudied cumulative impacts on their communities. Julia Bernal with Pueblo Action Alliance explained that “it’s important for Indigenous nations to collect their own baseline data to show any sort of measurable impact” that environmental injustices are generating. Most Native-led organizations, however, lack the capacity to collect and analyze data. Building that capacity would help Indigenous nations exercise their sovereignty in data-based policy-making.
Policy Leadership.

The vast majority of interviewees want Native grassroots leaders in the driver’s seat of developing climate-related policies and rules. Chris Peters and Tia Oros Peters from the Seventh Generation Fund, for example, explained that “Native Peoples know what the issues and challenges are in their own communities, and they are the best ones to design and actualize how to best resolve these issues.” White-led organizations, however, typically lead policy development, and are given resources to hire policy experts and researchers. The greatest challenge to realizing the leadership of Native-led organizations in policy development is accessing funding to engage policy analysts.

Representation in Public Office.

Anathea Chino from Advance Native Political Leadership pointed out that Native Americans comprise only 0.28% of elected officials. The absence of Native voices in legislative halls perpetuates the U.S. government’s colonial relationship with Native communities. Non-Natives continue to make decisions for Native Peoples rather than Native Peoples making choices for themselves. We are starting to see a slight shift; a record-breaking six Native Americans and Native Hawaiians were elected to the House of Representatives in 2020. However, this country and Native Peoples have a long way to go to reach equitable political representation.

Financial Stability.

Many Native-led organizations work on shoe-string budgets yet accomplish incredible feats. Native leaders want funders to make long-term commitments that will lead to organizational sustainability. The leaders at Tewa Women United, like many others, would like to invest in staff development and talked with excitement about offering their staff sabbaticals, wellness stipends and more, if funding were available.

Meaningful Participation in Funding Decision-making.

Across the board, interviewees shared the importance of restoring a balance of power between funders and Native communities. Native leaders envision funders seeking input from Indigenous communities about how and what to fund in Indigenous communities and hiring Native Peoples in decision-making positions. Native Peoples bring community connections that non-Natives may not have, as well as knowledge about how to best serve and engage with Indigenous grantees and organizations. The Seventh Generation Fund’s grantmaking program, for instance, involves collective responsibility and action to ensure meaningful participation of Indigenous leaders and to build and reinforce a movement for long term Native vision and self-determination.
Insensitivity and Ignorance: Challenges to Native Access to Funding

Grassroots leaders shared the following challenges to accessing, securing and utilizing funding from institutional philanthropy.

**Funders’ Limited Knowledge of Native Cultures.**

Interviewees stated that most non-Native people, specifically funders, lack knowledge about Native American culture and people. Too few funders understand the history of colonization and decolonization and the roles that Indigenous Peoples have played in both processes. Overall, the knowledge that funders have of Native Peoples is insufficient or needs serious correction.

**False Narratives.**

Several interviewees shared stories about false narratives within foundations about working with Native Peoples. Kandi White with Indigenous Environmental Network, for example, explained that some funders characterize “Indigenous populations [as too] small” to be funded or taken seriously. Consequently, Indigenous communities have not received equitable funding. Another Native leader said that some foundation officials believe that Native Peoples are “too complicated to work with,” based on one bad experience. Blanket assessments of complex and varied Native communities add to the erasure of Indigenous Peoples.

**Lack of Connections and Access.**

Many Indigenous-led organizations do not have connections to access funders. Foundations that accept applications by “invitation-only” erect a significant barrier for Native leaders. Julian Brave Noisecat with Data for Progress shared that philanthropy is “all about relationships and access. You can have a great idea but it doesn’t matter if you’re new to the scene and don’t have access to the resources you need.” Ahtza Dawn Chavez with NAVA Education Project said her organization is often limited in the types of funding they can access because “some funders won’t even look at you because they want to see a beefy revenue.” She questions how the Native Peoples’ organizations can generate “beefy revenue” if they aren’t receiving the funding to build it. Another grassroots leader shared a similar frustration with large foundations: “We are just too small for them but we do as much work as larger organizations do. We just can’t get into the running.”

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– Julian Brave Noisecat from Data for Progress

**Greater Organizing Costs.**

Carol Davis with Diné C.A.R.E. shared that the “cost of organizing on tribal lands is not the same as on urban lands. For every dollar [we] spend, urban areas only spend 70 cents.” This increased costs of organizing in rural areas result largely from expenses related to traveling to and from remote areas, and extra efforts required because of bad or non-existent cell phone and Internet service.
Lack of Long-term Philanthropic Investments.

Some foundations have funded Native-led nonprofits for limited, campaign-related work. But the short periods for these grants require the organizations to invest a lot of time writing proposals and reports relative to the lack of long-term impact on their organization. Multi-year funding at higher amounts allows for strategic growth. The few Indigenous-led organizations that have received grants from the same foundation for more than 5 consecutive years report that the foundations took very gradual steps towards long-term funding. Tammi Tiger with Native Voters Alliance Nevada shared that she “need(s) funders to understand that funding Natives once doesn’t mean you’re done giving to Native Peoples.” Ongoing, reliable investment is critical.

Inequitable Funding for Work in Native Communities.

In his article “Indigenous Communities and Environmental Justice,” Raymond Foxworth of the First Nations Development Institute points out that “non-Native-controlled organizations receive a large share of foundation grants intended to support Native community-based work.” Research also shows that Native organizations receive smaller grants than non-Native-led groups for similar work. “On average, foundations gave a little over $2 billion to environmental causes annually between 2014 and 2019. Only a total of 0.5 percent (five-tenths of one percent) of total foundation environmental giving was awarded to environmental organizations and causes in Native communities.”

Fickle Funders.

Many foundations have a short-term focus, funding the same strategies and issues that are “popular” in the philanthropic community at a particular moment. This results in unreliable resources for organizations working on long-term systems change. Corrine Sanchez from Tewa Women United shared that a few years ago “lots of Environmental Justice funding was coming through, [however] it then went ‘dry’ [for a bit] and we are now seeing a resurgence from the funders for this work.” Grassroots organizers shared with us that their organizations lost funding because foundations shifted attention to the COVID pandemic in 2020. An “on again, off again” funding approach hinders organizations’ sustainability. This challenge is particularly acute for Native-led organizations which take time to develop long-term relationships and trust within their communities.

Grant Demands/Requirements.

Grant application processes can be especially difficult for Native-led organizations, which often have limited capacity, in part because funders have historically ignored or mis-understood these groups. Executive Directors or senior staff of Indigenous-led organizations often play the role of grant writer. If grants are for small amounts, leaders of Native organizations must determine if it is worth the time and energy to apply for funding. If Native-led organizations receive grants, they often require significant extra work - such as participating in coalition meetings or weekly calls - which take valuable time from stretched Executive Directors or program staff.

Grant Restrictions.

Funding restrictions are sometimes at odds with the priorities and/or strategies of Native-led organizations. A foundation, for instance, may restrict how much of its grant can be spent on travel. But for an organization like Diné C.A.R.E. that works on reservations in rural areas, extensive travel is vital to its success. Similarly, many funders in the climate realm are unwilling to fund non-violent direct actions, despite Indigenous leaders’ belief that these actions are necessary to protect their sacred lands.

Working Outside the Nonprofit Structure.

Some Indigenous groups and activists do not wish to form or become part of 501(c)3 nonprofit organizations because they perceive joining the nonprofit industrial complex as intensifying their colonization. Nevertheless, they know their communities’ needs and how best to address them. Many funders, though, are unwilling or unable to fund individuals.

Competition.

Foundations are inadvertently pitting Indigenous organizations against one another for small grants. Many funders tend to be exclusionary in their giving to Indigenous groups, thinking that if one Native organization is doing certain work, they don’t have to fund another doing the same work. Entire ecosystems - individuals, organizations, and systems both within and outside of direct climate justice work - must be funded so that organizations can work in union rather than in competition. Despite the competition for grants, many Native-led organizations continue to trust their relationships with one another because they know they are striving for the same goals.
**Trauma.**

To obtain funding, Indigenous organizers often find themselves recounting their communities' historical and current traumas in order to demonstrate need. One grassroots leader called this process “funding trauma.” For Indigenous leaders, having to describe trauma repeatedly to non-Native funders is like re-opening a fresh wound, compounding the accumulated harm. In addition, competition for grants leads many Native-led organizations to operate from a scarcity mindset, reinforcing their worries about organizational survival and diminishing their capacity to further their organizations’ missions. Anxieties about funding add another layer to the historical trauma Indigenous leaders have experienced. Philanthropic funding should heal, not deepen harm.

**Gatekeeping and Lack of Transparency.**

Institutions that fund climate justice work are typically not transparent about their decision-making processes. Applicants and grantees often do not know exactly how funding decisions are made and hardly, if ever, see Native Peoples represented among decision-makers. Some of our grassroots interviewees expressed frustration over this lack of transparency, sharing instances when funders began conversations without clear intentions.

**Extractive Relationships.**

Many funders request information from Indigenous organizations - their intellectual property - but give them nothing in return. One grassroots leader described a situation in which a foundation representative asked his organization for community stories. The foundation then used the stories in marketing materials but never equitably compensated the organization. This incident illustrates white supremacy and the continuation of a colonialist model in which powerful foundations extract resources from Native Peoples while leaving Native organizations and people with little to nothing in return.

**Tokenization.**

Despite some improvements, grassroots leaders often feel tokenized within progressive spaces, including the climate movement. Kandi White with Indigenous Environmental Network said that environmental working groups or coalitions often invite Native Peoples to participate, not to center and highlight Native voices, but for surface diversity.

**Lack of Trust from Funders.**

Grassroots leaders feel that funders distrust Native Peoples to design and implement their own work. Many funders second-guess Native climate justice strategies. Dallas Goldtooth with Indigenous Environmental Network shared that in his experience the biggest obstacle is a lack of trust from philanthropy towards frontline organizers and People of Color-led organizations that they will accomplish what they say they will. “There is an emphasis on proving [to funders] that you’re going to do what you say because there is a lack of trust. We have to jump through so many hoops.”

**Micromanaging Campaigns.**

Some grassroots leaders described funders who micro-managed their campaigns, which disrupted their work and made it difficult to realize their goals. One interviewee shared that “funders micro-manage campaigns because they think they are organizers. [Even though we] have our strategies thought through” This is another example of how funders do not trust Indigenous-led organizations to design and implement their own campaigns.
Opportunities to Fund Native-led Climate Justice Efforts

Grassroots and funder interviewees described the Native climate justice movement as relatively small in terms of the number of groups or nonprofits engaged in the work. This is likely due to underinvestment in Native-led efforts. That inequity, however, presents opportunities for funders to seek out and invest deeply in existing Native-led organizations.

Below are strategies, approaches, and campaigns that Native grassroots leaders identified. Some are well known and have been embraced by the climate movement, while others are either not recognized or taken seriously by non-Native allies. We encourage you to lean into strategies that are unfamiliar or that challenge your pre-existing notions. We highly encourage funders to talk directly with the organizations who are engaged in these efforts.

Strategic Approaches to Addressing the Climate Crisis

Just Transition.

Just Transition - the movement from an exploitive fossil fuel-based economy to a diverse, renewable energy economy that benefits workers and impacted communities - begins with comprehensive, community-generated local, state, and federal policies. Many Tribal communities reliant on fossil fuel-based economies are losing jobs because of the rising cost of fossil fuels. Concurrently, states are, one-by-one, setting goals for renewable energy and carbon reductions. These factors make it imperative that Indigenous Peoples play leadership roles in Just Transition efforts. Organizations like Native People’s Action and Native Movement - along with other Alaska-based organizations - have co-created statewide networks through which activists plan and advocate for Just Transition policies. At the federal level, Indigenous Environmental Network has hired extra staff to ensure Native representation in national Green New Deal policy formation. Foundations can provide funding to increase the capacity of Native organizations and leaders to participate in critical policy discussions.

Economic Reclamation.

Native organizations are vital players in creating, advocating for and ensuring the implementation of policies that support economic development on their lands. Several of our interviewees - grassroots leaders, thought leaders, and funders alike - described the challenges of building economies for tribal people that do not depend on the exploitation of natural resources or extraction of fossil fuels from their lands. Regenerative economies - based on ecological restoration, community protection, equitable partnerships, justice, and full and fair participatory processes - have the potential to replace extractive, fossil fuel-based economies while also increasing prosperity of Native communities. One grassroots leader explained that without viable, healthy economic structures “...there will always be temptation for folks to allow mineral extraction or pipelines across lands.”

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Clean Energy Development.
Clean energy generation is a potential avenue for economic development on tribal lands. At a large scale, this opportunity typically requires coordination among multiple government and private entities, including tribal governments. That coordination, in turn, requires advocacy and stewardship from organizations that understand the entities involved and their shared or competing interests. Rather than allowing non-Native politicians and white-led environmental organizations to spearhead these processes for growing a clean energy economy, funders should support the leadership of Native organizations in stewarding this economic opportunity. The Tribal Solar Accelerator Fund, for example, is a Native-led initiative that supports tribal renewable energy projects. At a smaller scale, Native Renewables installs off-grid solar infrastructure at homes on tribal lands where many residents lack access to electricity.

Returning Land Control to Native Peoples.
Social justice necessitates that progressive advocates and funders support Native people’s rightful land claims. By honoring the sovereignty of Indigenous Peoples over lands they currently inhabit, funders can help restore ecologically sustainable practices in those regions. The Cherokee Preservation Foundation, for example, preserves and protects the natural environment for the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. Their Generations Qualla program reflects traditional Cherokee values and behaviors, and illustrates how the Tribe strives to balance natural, cultural, spiritual and economic needs for the next seven generations. Funders can also support the #LandBack movement, a world-wide drive to restore to Indigenous Peoples lands that were stolen from them throughout centuries of conquest and colonization. Some Native Peoples currently live on lands they were forced onto after governments and settlers appropriated their ancestral lands because they were rich in resources. The #LandBack movement seeks to return control of ancestral homelands to Native Peoples displaced from them. There are hundreds of examples of #LandBack movement efforts, including the Sogorea Te’ Land Trust, an Indigenous woman-led group that facilitated the return of some Bay Area land to the Karkin Ohlone people.

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Stopping New Fossil Fuel Infrastructure.
Across the country, Indigenous organizations have led fights against fossil fuel infrastructure, most notably oil pipelines. From North Dakota to Louisiana, Indigenous Peoples have literally put their bodies on the line in last ditch efforts to stop proposed fossil fuel pipelines from destroying their ancestral lands, religious sites, and the water sources for millions of people. RISE is just one example of Native Peoples educating their community on treaty rights and empowering them to take action to stop the Enbridge Line 3 pipeline.

Divestment.
A global Indigenous movement is pressuring major financial institutions to stop funding fossil fuel companies, especially those destroying Native lands and communities. Organizations such as WECAN and Divest Invest Protect have led delegations of Indigenous women to speak with executives of large banks and financial corporations about the negative impacts that their investments in fossil fuel extraction companies are having on Native People and the planet.

Fossil Fuel Accountability.
Too often, fossil fuel companies are not held accountable for the lasting damage to the land and communities that their business practices create. Abandoned and unplugged oil wells, for example, are not monitored, reported or regulated. In New Mexico alone, the estimated cost to address each abandoned and unplugged well is three billion dollars. Native-led groups are fighting for adoption and enforcement of stricter environmental regulations that would compel fossil fuel companies to pay for damages and mitigate the harm they’ve caused.
Rights of Nature.

Some Indigenous leaders advocate for the legal rights of nature. They consider the rights of nature—such as rivers and trees—in line with human rights. Similar to advocates for human rights or animal rights, nature rights supporters establish a baseline level of protection and standard of treatment for all natural bodies. Honor The Earth is a Native-led organization that has been working on this legal strategy for years.

The Rights of Mother Earth.

To non-Native people, the Rights of Mother Earth concept may sound similar to the Rights of Nature. But the Rights of Mother Earth framework is a strategic approach grounded in traditional Indigenous knowledge, practice and teachings. Inspired by decades of work of Indigenous People in the global south and by the April 22, 2010 World People’s Conference on Climate Change (which resulted in the Universal Declaration on the Rights of Mother Earth), the Rights of Mother Earth movement calls for forging new societal systems that align with the concepts of harmony and balance among all and with all things; people in harmony with nature; collective well-being and satisfactions of basic necessities for all; a recognition of human beings for what they are, and not what they own; elimination of colonialism, imperialism and interventionism; equality, complementarity, and peace. Through its support of traditional grassroots communities, cultural renewal, and ecosystem vitality, the Seventh Generation Fund for Indigenous Peoples exemplifies an organizational mission that centers Mother Earth rights nationally and throughout Indigenous communities worldwide.

Countering Destructive Stereotypes.

It is difficult for Native organizations to build political power and public support when the media perpetuates dehumanizing and damaging stereotypes of Indigenous Peoples. As one grassroots leader plainly stated, “We have to interrupt the narrative about us. People think we don’t exist or that we’re all drunk.” However, some organizations are trying to change this. For example, IllumiNative is a leading organization accurately representing contemporary Native Peoples through story-telling that reaches non-Native audiences and that advances policymaking.

Organizer Training.

Many organizer training programs exist in the progressive movement and within the climate movement specifically, but there are no large-scale programs rooted in Native cultures and history for Indigenous Peoples. The Native Organizers Alliance hopes to launch a national training institute for Native leaders. Such programs, using an Indigenous framework, would accomplish the goals of developing more skilled organizers in the climate justice movement, as well as restoring Native cultural practices and values rooted in the land and nature.

Grassroots Power-Building.

It is often difficult and time consuming for Native organizers to meet in-person with people living on tribal lands because of geographic remoteness and lack of communications infrastructure. Nevertheless, most Native leaders we interviewed consider in-person conversations critical to building trust and support from their communities. As one interviewee said, “I wouldn’t be successful with strategies and tactics if I wasn’t in the community and people didn’t trust and know me.” Interviewees also expressed their hope for Indigenous movement leaders (including activists, nonprofit heads, funders, public officials, community center directors) to be much more connected with each other. One grassroots interviewee stressed the importance of funding Native organizations and leaders to meet in-person to build community and trust.

Strengthening the Native Movement

Youth and Leadership Development.

Many of our interviewees spoke of the dire need for more leadership development programs and professional pathways for Native youth. One grassroots leader said organizations outside Native communities often "pluck" young, motivated Indigenous activists. To build the leadership and political power of Indigenous Peoples, funders should invest resources to attract, retain and grow the base of talented young Native leaders to organize and advocate for their communities. Dozens of organizations are doing this work, including Tewa Women United which invests in young people's growth so that they can build leadership and fight the effects of colonialism.
The geographic remoteness of some Indigenous communities, their wariness of outsiders, and the importance of in-person interactions make Native political education efforts very time and resource intensive. Native organizations require ample funding to hire Native organizers who will travel and have face-to-face conversations with Native community members. This process builds the understanding, trust, and support necessary to advance climate equity goals. Nearly every grassroot organization involved in our research conducts some form of political education using various tactics and platforms.

Policy Capacity.

Most Native organizations lack internal policy experts who can analyze and formulate policies at the intersection of climate change, fossil fuel pollution, clean energy, and tribal law. Given the low level of funding for Native organizations, Indigenous-led organizations consider in-house policy expertise a luxury. Consequently, these groups cannot always adequately advocate for Indigenous communities’ interests. One organizational leader we interviewed would like to add a staff member “who can speak to the transition to renewable energy, focused on power replacement and agreements.” Another organization’s leader talked about the need to educate legislators on tribal land policy and to educate Indigenous leaders on climate and clean energy policy in order to gain broad support for a Native-focused climate policy platform. Investments in Native-led organizations’ policy infrastructure, as well as investments in local Native sources of policy support, such as tribal colleges, would not only heighten Native leadership in the climate movement but also support the broader Native movement.

Research.

Grassroots leaders frequently mentioned that research would immensely aid their advocacy efforts, including research on the prevalence of abandoned wells on tribal land, politicians’ connections to energy companies, and air quality monitoring on tribal lands. In addition, Native Peoples are often left out of national polls. So, there is a lack of data on the opinions and views of the Indigenous population. The leaders we interviewed cited lack of funds for research as a major obstacle.

Mini-grants.

Several organizations have developed creative ways to build financial opportunities and stability among Native communities and organizations. One example of a modest yet critical funding model is the Hawai’i People’s Fund, an Indigenous woman-led partnership between activists and donors that issues $5,000-10,000 grants to small community groups and new organizations that larger funding institutions sometimes consider “too risky” or “too small.” Over nearly 40 years, these grants have had unparalleled impact on the grassroots progressive movement in Hawai’i, particularly Native-led efforts.

Elevating Native Leadership

Political Leadership.

Many grassroots leaders explained the importance of Native Peoples in decision-making roles, their desire to see more Native People in the pipeline for elected offices, and the need to support these potential Native champions through 501(c)4 groups and PACs. The infrastructure to realize this vision is developing. Indigenous Peoples have created organizations like Advance Native Political Leadership in response to the scarce representation of Indigenous Peoples in public office.

Civic Engagement.

According to the National Congress of American Indians, 34% of Native Americans are eligible to vote but are not registered. Even so, the Native vote in 2020 provided margins of victory for various candidates in Arizona, Wisconsin and other states. Increasing voter participation among Native Peoples would make government more accountable to them. Reaching them, registering them to vote, educating them on the issues, and ensuring that they vote are resource-intensive processes because many Native Americans live in remote locations and some do not have mailing addresses. The historic underinvestment in Native organizations extends to nonprofits such as the NAVA Education Project which are doing important civic engagement work. Rising attacks on voting accessibility make Indigenous Peoples especially susceptible to disenfranchisement. Because Native-led groups engage in relational organizing, year-round engagement with their communities is critical to their success during voting season. However, most foundations that fund civic engagement efforts do so only during election cycles. Consequently, organizations involved in year-round power-building and civic engagement work fall victim to the boom and bust cycle of civic engagement funding.
Strengthening Cultural Resources

Culture and Arts.

The importance of art and culture in social movements is well documented. This is particularly salient in Native-led social movements because Native culture and arts are rooted in values ultimately tied to environmental protection. Many organizations, such as Pueblo Action Alliance, consider art and creative expression key components of activism and youth leadership development. Funding the work of culture bearers is vital to strengthening the role of Native Peoples and organizations in the climate movement and, ultimately, realizing our shared goals for a just and sustainable world.

Strength, Resilience, and Healing.

Centuries of violence and exploitation have left many Native communities traumatized. Building the strength and resilience of these communities is a first step in healing from generations of colonization. Healing creates the capacity for long-term visioning, reclaiming, and (re)building regenerative economies and thriving communities. Funders can play a role by supporting healing work carried out by Indigenous Peoples for Indigenous Peoples.

Pueblo Action Alliance
Recommendations for Funders

Native Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Alaskan Natives are integral to the social justice and climate movements in the U.S. Yet, non-Native movement leaders and organizations, including those in the climate justice movement, frequently overlook or do not respectfully engage Indigenous communities. The philanthropy sector can help change those dynamics by supporting and elevating the work of Native Peoples through significant and equitable investments. Doing so requires a thoughtful approach. These recommendations can guide funders seeking to start, grow or review their Indigenous-focused grantmaking.

Understand and Respect Indigenous History, Culture, and Contemporary Experiences.

Interviewees across the board frequently commented that most non-Native Americans lack in-depth knowledge of Native Peoples’ history, culture and contemporary lives. Non-Native funders who are considering funding Native-led work should educate themselves on these topics. Native Americans in Philanthropy is updating a training curriculum that provides information about Indigenous Peoples, worldviews, and contemporary realities to help non-Native funders become more aware of the diversity, nuances, and complexities of Native Peoples and their issues.

Acknowledged History.

Like the United States, the philanthropic sector is rooted in capitalism, colonization and white supremacy. A number of the grassroots leaders we interviewed spoke about the importance of funders acknowledging this violent, complex and interwoven racial, capitalist, philanthropic and colonized history as a critical step in developing authentic and respectful relationships with Native Peoples.

Be Transparent About Principles and Values Associated with Native-focused Giving.

Funders should clearly share the guiding principles and values they will employ to build relationships with Native grantees. Centering the experiences of Native Peoples will likely result in emphasizing trust, community, and interconnectedness. When examining your organization’s existing value statements, ask yourself if they reflect Native Peoples. International Funders for Indigenous Peoples have shared clearly stated values and a description of how they manifest them daily.

Build Relationships.

The importance of relationship-building with Native organizations cannot be overstated. Due to historic and ongoing exploitation, abuse and neglect by non-Natives, many Indigenous Peoples do not trust non-Indigenous institutions, including foundations. As such, funders should dedicate significant time and effort to gain the trust and confidence of potential grantees. Some interviewees from both the funding and grassroots sectors suggested that program officers spend several days with prospective Native grantees to build relationships. Grassroot interviewees overwhelmingly described their best relationships with funders as partnerships.

Practice Active Allyship.

Going above and beyond your role as a grantmaker is critical to properly address the historical inequity that Native-led organizations have experienced within climate and environmental philanthropy. Non-Native funders should advocate for greater representation of Native Peoples in all movement spaces and start conversations with non-Native peers about the issues and challenges Indigenous communities face. Other valuable examples of active allyship include introducing grantee partners to other funders, seeking opportunities to elevate Native organizations’ work, and working with Indigenous partners regularly to provide coaching or mentorship as requested and/or appropriate.

Be Aware of Power Dynamics.

To be true allies to Native leaders, funders should ask what sort of supporting role, if any, Indigenous...
organizations want funders to play beyond providing resources. Some grassroots leaders shared that too often a funder’s involvement in a campaign complicated the power dynamic in planning spaces, raising questions about who had final decision-making power. One leader acknowledged, however, that sometimes it is helpful for funders to leverage their relationships to advance campaigns or projects. But, to respect Native Peoples’ leadership, funders should provide non-monetary assistance only when asked to do so.

Engage in Trust-based Grantmaking.

Many resources are available to funders on trust-based philanthropy. We encourage all funders to review them. Many of the lessons we cover in this report overlap with the values grounding trust-based philanthropy.

Change Grantmaking.

The vast majority of Indigenous grassroots leaders we interviewed work for under-resourced and understaffed organizations. They described several grantmaking policies that would significantly increase their ability to succeed:

» **Deep, multi-year funding.** Grassroots groups’ power is rooted in the trust they’ve built with their communities. It often takes years to build this trust. Multi-year funding provides the financial assurance that organizations need to engage in the long-term work of developing the community trust necessary for power-building and successful organizing. As Nick Tilsen of **NDN Collective** said, “Fund us like you want us to win.”

» **Fund ecosystems.** For positive changes in Native communities to be sustainable, funders need to support social justice ecosystems; this means funding climate justice organizations as well as organizations and institutions working on regenerative economic growth and the various intersecting social justice issues in Native communities like gender and sexuality based violence, the long-standing impacts of poverty, labor shortages and opportunities, accessibility to fresh and nutritious foods and more.

» **Flexibility.** Given cultural differences between Native and non-Native organizing, and given the limited capacity of many Native-led organizations, equitable funding to Native-led groups should involve flexible timelines and metrics to measure success. Funders should be open to the metrics and timelines Native-led organizations set.

» **Risk-taking.** The vast majority of climate funders would likely agree that the U.S. climate movement as a whole is not moving quickly enough to halt the biggest climate threats. Experimentation is necessary to reach our shared goals. In this spirit, we encourage funders to take risks by supporting Indigenous approaches to movement-building that may be unfamiliar. We also encourage funders to invest in new Native-led organizations to reach their full potential.

» **Minimal reporting.** Keeping in mind the capacity constraints of most Native-led organizations, funders should consider alternative approaches to reporting that do not require staff time disproportionate to the size of the grant. Streamlining reporting as much as possible benefits the work on the ground: the less time grantees spend writing reports, the more time they can focus on their campaigns, advocacy and growth. One way to minimize reporting requirements is to stay in touch with grantees year-round through short check-in calls.

» **Transparency and accountability.** A just giving program involves Native staff or groups composed of Native leaders in decision-making positions and is transparent about application and decision-making processes.

Involve Intermediaries.

Some foundations may seek to establish a new “Native Program” within their institution. We caution against this approach for two reasons: one is that this approach “others” the work of Native People rather than integrating Native leadership into all aspects of a foundation’s programming. Second, these siloed programs often still receive just a miniscule percentage of the total giving by a foundation and do not actually challenge the inequity highlighted in this report. Instead, we recommend that foundations seek to integrate Native leadership throughout their organization and programming as well as seek out Native-led intermediary funders.

Intermediary entities are ideal for channeling resources to geographic areas where funders lack connections or the capacity to build long-lasting relationships with Native organizations. Native-led intermediaries include **First Nations Development Institute**, which has been in the field for 40 years, **Seventh Generation Fund for Indigenous Peoples** which began in 1977, and the **NDN Collective**, initiated in 2018.

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Closing Thoughts

Addressing the gross funding inequities between Native and non-Native organizations will require commitment, organizing and advocacy within the philanthropic sector to:

» Make big investments in Native-led efforts
» Encourage other funders to do the same
» Publicize grants to Indigenous-led organizations
» Discuss Native-focused giving in philanthropic gatherings and ask why funders are not supporting Indigenous-led efforts
» Hold foundations and others accountable to equitable funding for Native-led organizations.

Funders have a special responsibility to Native Peoples. Foundation grants are made with money generated from the use - and sometimes exploitation - of stolen Indigenous lands. The humility resulting from acknowledging that reality should guide the relationships we build with Native allies and frame our work to give back the resources that Native Peoples’ lands helped create.

This report is only the beginning of the Equity Fund’s commitment to Native Peoples. We welcome others in philanthropy to join us in learning and improving our practices. We welcome conversations about this report and our work. We want to be in dialogue with allies who are joining or who are already on the path of supporting Indigenous leadership, sovereignty, and healing.
Report Methodology

This report is primarily informed by interviews with thirty-four grassroots leaders, thought leaders, and philanthropic leaders - Native and non-Native allies who support Native-led work across the United States. Equity Fund Program Associate Kristen Mejia and Program Officer Lydia D. Avila conducted the interviews and wrote this report. The authors do not identify as Native and therefore are simply the conduits for the information provided by interviewees and researchers. Two Native leaders and one Native funder reviewed the report before publication to help ensure accuracy and move towards greater accountability to Native Peoples.

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