

# Restoring a cultural-ecological relationship via community-informed education on Indigenous heritage to reconnect land and culture within the Little Conestoga Creek Watershed, Pennsylvania

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## Need, Purpose & Goals

A common approach to restoration is to “restore to a pre-European settlement state” with function as a main driver. This approach often overlooks the people and cultures who have lived here for thousands of years prior to European contact, and who have deep, ongoing relationships with land and water. Their influence is a key part of the landscape’s story.

Including community engagement in restoration can support ecological health and cultural meaning. So, we ask: What are the local cultural-ecological relationships prior to European settlement? And what does it look like to restore this relationship today?

In Pennsylvania, the landscape holds Indigenous legacies of past relationship with the land. However, it is important to recognize that Indigenous people are here today who call this place home and maintain meaningful relationships with this landscape. This initial phase of the Indigenous Heritage Initiative focuses on engaging with the local Indigenous community and facilitating conversations and education geared towards conservation professionals. The goals of this phase are to educate, engage, and connect.

**Educate** - Educate members of the conservation field and general public about local Indigenous heritage related to ecology, restoration efforts, and water quality.

**Engage** - Provide a framework for community engagement that spans public and private sectors, engages many voices, and supports the exchange of practice and knowledge.

**Connect** - Foster existing and create new connections between the community and local landscapes to galvanize community support for the protection, preservation, restoration, and stewardship of land and waters within the Little Conestoga Creek Watershed.

## Process & Methodology

**Surveys** - Used to establish baseline understanding and underlying perceptions held by local conservation professionals and Indigenous communities. Results revealed a common perception - that a current Indigenous cultural-ecological relationship is not evident, citing a lack of knowledge and belief that no recognized tribes remain in the region. This perception contributes to a broader notion that any living connection to past Indigenous cultures has been lost in Pennsylvania. Ongoing engagement is challenging this notion. Indigenous people who claim ancestral ties to this land exist, and Indigenous people living in the region are here today, maintaining meaningful connections to it. Barriers identified in the survey include: lack of Indigenous recognition and representation, lack of programming on cultural resources, poor communication across silos, and difficulty in determining who the Indigenous leaders are locally.

**Interviews** - Used to build upon questions asked in the surveys with Indigenous community members, allies, and subject matter experts. Discussion regarding the lack of Indigenous recognition in Pennsylvania was a common theme throughout.

**Literature Review** - Used to assess what educational information is currently available to the general public, as well as reading and listening to commentaries and critiques of the restoration and conservation profession by Indigenous writers, scientists, etc.

**Focus Groups** - Small groups of local Indigenous community members and allies put together by our stakeholders to identify educational themes, using a series of questions to spark conversations and identify topics important to them. Focus groups were asked how we could challenge restoration and conservation organizations to go beyond their current practices, where their responses help identify tangible action items that professionals can integrate into their work.

## Communities Engaged *(so far)*

### Positionality & Transparency

We recognize that Pennsylvania currently has no federally-recognized Indigenous tribes or nations, which creates challenges for individuals with Indigenous heritage in claiming legitimacy, and for researchers like ourselves in identifying who holds authority to speak for the land.

Pennsylvania’s Indigenous history is complex. It includes the forced removal of Native peoples from their homelands, as well as the relocation of individuals from many nations into the state, notably through institutions like the Carlisle Indian Industrial School. Many of their descendants continue to live across the state today.

We do not see it as our role to determine whose stories or lived experiences are valid. Instead, we believe it is essential to engage with both historical and contemporary Indigenous voices connected to this land and water.

To that end, we have engaged – and will continue to engage – with a range of voices, including local Indigenous community members and organizations, cultural and ecological heritage leaders, Indigenous allies, and federally recognized tribes with ancestral ties to the project area. These collaborations are central to shaping our process, informing our understanding, and guiding the project’s evolution and outcomes.

Annita Lucchesi – National Wildlife Federation, Artemis Initiative  
Benton Webber – Lancaster Township Engineer

**Blue Rock Heritage Center – Charlie Douts, President & Debbie Saylor, Curator**

Christine Brubaker

**Circle Legacy Center – MaryAnn Robins; Focus Group Members: Christine Brubaker, Wendy Flandershall, Cheryl Germer, Joann McLaughlin, Alice MyersHall, Barry Kauffman, Jessica McPherson**

Center for the Futures of Native Peoples – Mandy Cheromiah, Ph.D.

Chapter 28 Lower Susquehanna Archaeological Society  
Debbie Saylor, Chairperson

**Conestoga-Susquehannock Tribe — Andrea Leigon, Michael Mantooth & Tiffany Johnson**

Delaware Nation\* – Katelyn Lucas

Delaware Tribe\* – Jeremy Johnson

Edward W. Wilson, Ph.D.

Franklin & Marshall College, Reckoning with Lancaster Initiative – Dr. Eric Hirsh, Associate Professor of Environmental Studies & Dr. Mary Ann Levine, Professor of Anthropology; Student Researchers: Jamie (Abigail) Gavigan & Stephanie Sexton

**Healing Our Planet – Victoria Valentine, Robin Maguire, Emerson Sampaio**

Indian Steps Museum – Debbie Saylor, Curator

Kurt Carr, former Senior Curator of Archaeology at the State Museum of Pennsylvania and retired Head of Archaeology at the PA State Historic Preservation Office and PA Archaeological Council

Malinda Harnish

Mark Clatterbuck, Ph.D.

Mennonite Life, 1719 Museum – Jean Kilheffer Hess & Heather Strahin

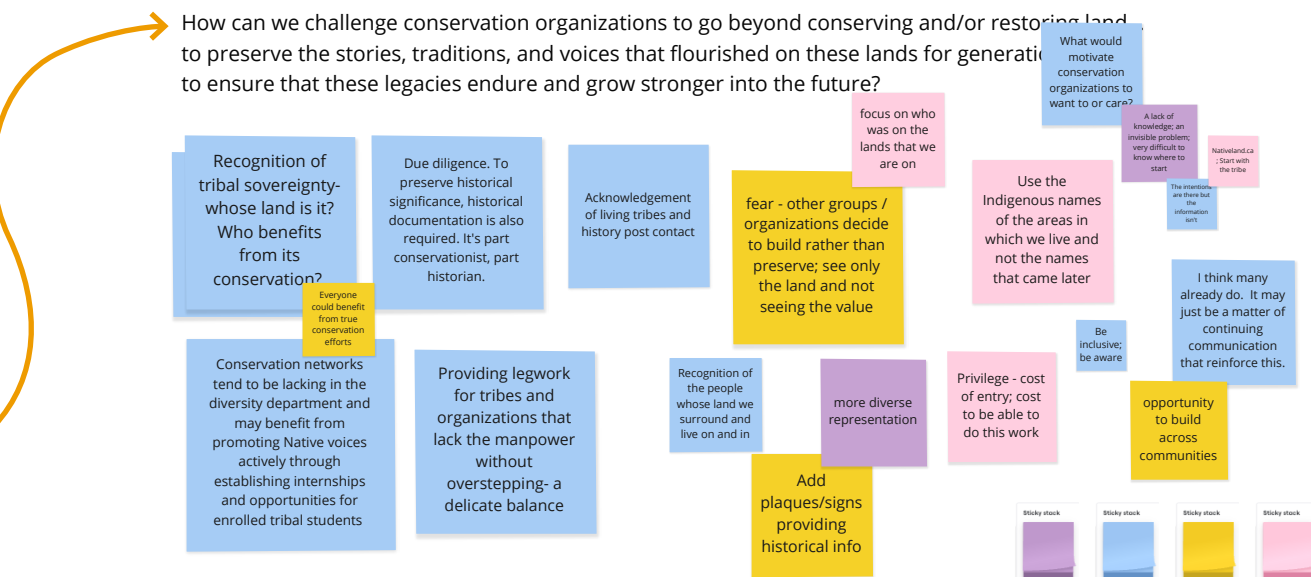
Millersville University – Dr. Marlene Arnold & Dr. Tanya Kevorkian

South Mountain Partnership – Katie Hess & Julia Chain

Susquehanna National Heritage Area – Hope Byers, Sophia Vayansky, Amber Freeman & Allison Sholz

This list includes Indigenous community members and allies, and subject matter experts with whom we have engaged with thus far. This process is ongoing, and we continue to add to this list as time moves forward. Our role as facilitators is to connect communities across silos, with the goal of amplifying past and present Indigenous voices and perspectives. Those in bold represent a stakeholder group or organization who have put together focus groups for engagement.

\*Initial engagement began at the local level with Indigenous communities nearby. Delaware Nation and Tribe were engaged following this initial local focus. During this process, we learned of their law, which does not allow them to work with unrecognized tribes and groups. This law is in place as a result of harm caused by non-recognized groups claiming tribal identities. As a result, they have chosen to not participate in this project at this time. We share this with you so that you can choose how to interpret the educational content developed as part of this project, and for you to be informed when working with Indigenous communities in Pennsylvania.



## Challenges

- Complexity of Indigenous history and lack of Indigenous recognition in Pennsylvania
- Connecting with the right individuals
- Capacity of volunteer engagement
- Underlying biases and / or motives of participants

## Opportunities

- Knowledge sharing across silos / disciplines
- Demonstrating the importance of “voluntary Indigenous engagement” at the local level
- Helping advance rematriation efforts by restoring landscapes to their original forms and functions
- Collaborating with the local Indigenous community, acting upon their suggestions for conservation and restoration professionals

## Phase 1 Timeline



## Educational Tour Snapshot

We are currently in the process of translating community input into an educational tour hosted on ArcGIS StoryMap, where multimedia content is linked to public parks, creating an immersive, place-based learning experience. One educational topic suggested by the community was the Thanksgiving Address. In this example, someone can view a meadow from the trail in a local park, while listening to the Thanksgiving Address, narrated by a local Indigenous community member’s voice, which creates a multi-sensory experience with the land through sight, sound, touch, and possibly even taste and smell if visiting these spots in-person.



Each stop on the tour will be paired with reflections connecting cultural insights to restoration and conservation. The Thanksgiving Address brings up gratitude, abundance, and reciprocity - offering a meaningful contrast to a scarcity mindset that can underpin our work in restoration and conservation. For example, while fear of biodiversity loss can motivate action, it can also foster competition, resource hoarding, and short-term thinking.

Instead, we can ask ourselves:

- What does it mean to approach restoration from a mindset of abundance?
- How can we foster collaboration over competition?
- What does sharing resources with the local Indigenous community look like in practice?

The final educational tour will include 10-15 stops. Stay connected as we continue to work with our stakeholders to shape and share this evolving story.