



PATHWAYS

Across America

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TRAILS ARE INDIGENOUS:

BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN NATIONAL TRAILS AND INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

BY JACQUELINE THOMPSON, PNTS COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR

Trails are guides across vast and diverse landscapes for many histories, people, animals, and beyond. They flow through the territories and hard borders that so often reinforce narrow concepts of what community really is. Like undammed rivers, trails connect ecosystems, landscapes and cultures. Native lands, National Trails—a resource that seeks to inspire meaningful engagement between Indigenous communities and the National Trails System—aims to support what trails inherently do best: cultivating and maintaining relationships and connection.



"A majority of trails under the National Trail System have Indigenous foundations or are Indigenous in creation," says Kiana Etsate-Gashytewa, Indigenous Mapping and Research Coordinator for the Partnership for the National Trails System. "Indigenous nations have significant relationships in and around the trails themselves with deep historical, cultural and spiritual meanings."

Indigenous people who have the deepest connections to the land and trails have historically been left out of the trail and land management conversation in what is now the United States. That is why Native Lands, National Trails was created. Acknowledging ancestral land is a first step. Meaningful engagement as a step beyond means investing in the community and building real partnerships.

"Being able to strengthen tribal relations means to strengthen every other connection that there is," says Etsate-Gashytewa. "It's a continued domino effect that has proven to create positive change, when handled and fostered with conscious care."

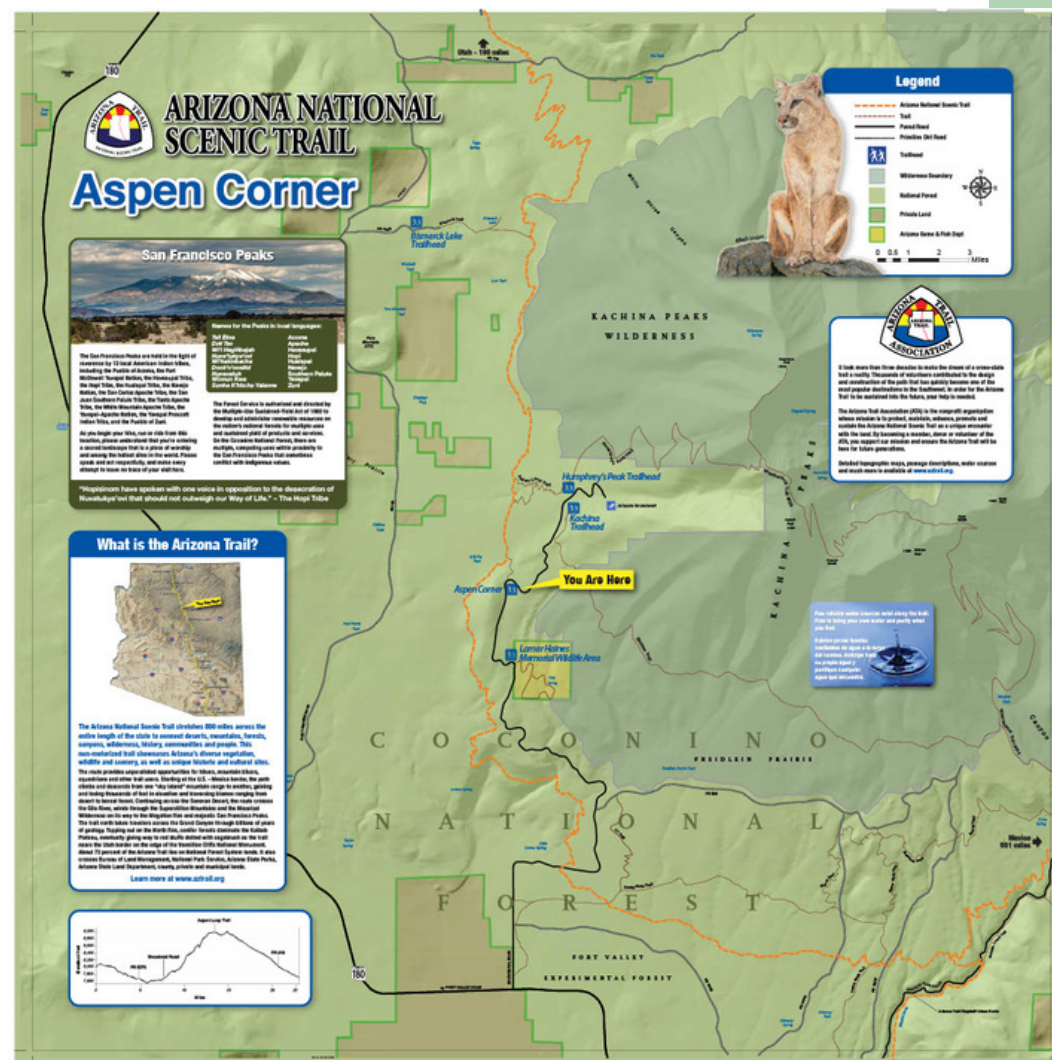
Many trail organizations have worked hard in recent decades to bring Indigenous voices into the forefront of decisionmaking and storytelling within the National Trails System. Just one example includes the Arizona Trail Association (ATA) and its partnerships with the many tribal nations that have ties to the Arizona National Scenic Trail (AZT).

Matthew Nelson, Executive Director of the ATA, commented, "We are rarely building trails, we are really improving existing ones. The reality is that we are just continuing an Indigenous tradition. We are not doing anything new here; we are providing pathways that connect us to the land."

One of the ATA's projects includes updating trail signage to include direct perspectives from local tribes. For instance, one trailhead sign near what is now called the San Francisco Peaks was created collectively between the ATA and the 13 tribes that have deep historical and continual relationships with the mountain. The sign displays the mountain's many Indigenous names while emphasizing the cultural and spiritual importance of the land.

The ATA has future plans to expand on this project by integrating Indigenous names back into the AZT cartography. "One of the first acts of cultural erasure was the renaming of places," says Nelson. "Hearing the Indigenous name of the land you're standing on is powerful. There are so many opportunities, and all we need is just a little bit of success to inspire others."

Indigenous ties to the land are deeply rooted in ancestry and history, which has powerful implications for modern times. Troy Wayne Poteete, co-founder and Executive Director of the Trail of Tears Association and former Chief Justice of the Cherokee Nation said: "Our culture is alive, and our language is alive....Every time we go to a community and have some event or sign dedication commemorating the Trail of Tears, it is another opportunity for us to honor our ancestors who preserved the Cherokee as a distinct cultural and political entity."



Trail Sign at Aspen Corner created by the ATA with the consultation of 13 Indigenous tribes from the region. Provided courtesy of the ATA.

Partnership Updates

Upcoming PNTS Webinars:

Tourism, Promotion, Outreach, Engagement Webinar Series: Documenting the Stories of the Old Spanish National Historic Trail.

June 20, 2023; 3pm-4pm EST

Join us to learn about how the Old Spanish Trail Association has documented the voices and memories of people, communities and participants involved in the Old Spanish Historic Trail.

Upcoming Grant Opportunities with the National Park Trust Webinar

July 12, 2023; 3pm-4pm EST

Join us to learn about upcoming grant opportunities that may benefit your trail organization. During this webinar, Ivan Levin, the Director of Strategic Partnerships & Communications with the National Park Trust, will give an overview of the relevant funding opportunities, including the NPS Challenge Cost Share Program, Hydro Flask Park For All grants program, Every Kid Outdoors Small Grants Program, and the Kids to Parks Day School Grants Program.



Kiana Etsate-Gashytewa with Carin Farley, BLM National Scenic and Historic Trails Lead at the 2022 National Trails Workshop.

"Hearing the indigenous name of the land you're standing on is powerful. There are so many opportunities, and all we need is just a little bit of success to share to inspire others."

To him, meaningful engagement is about moving forward with collaboration and inclusion for the greater good of all people and beings. He continues, "It is an opportunity to tell the largest story: that our ancestor's efforts were not in vain. We have survived, we are here."

Indigenous people, along with their wisdom and culture, are alive. Integrating their participation, voices, stories, languages, and perspectives are essential keys to land and trail management.

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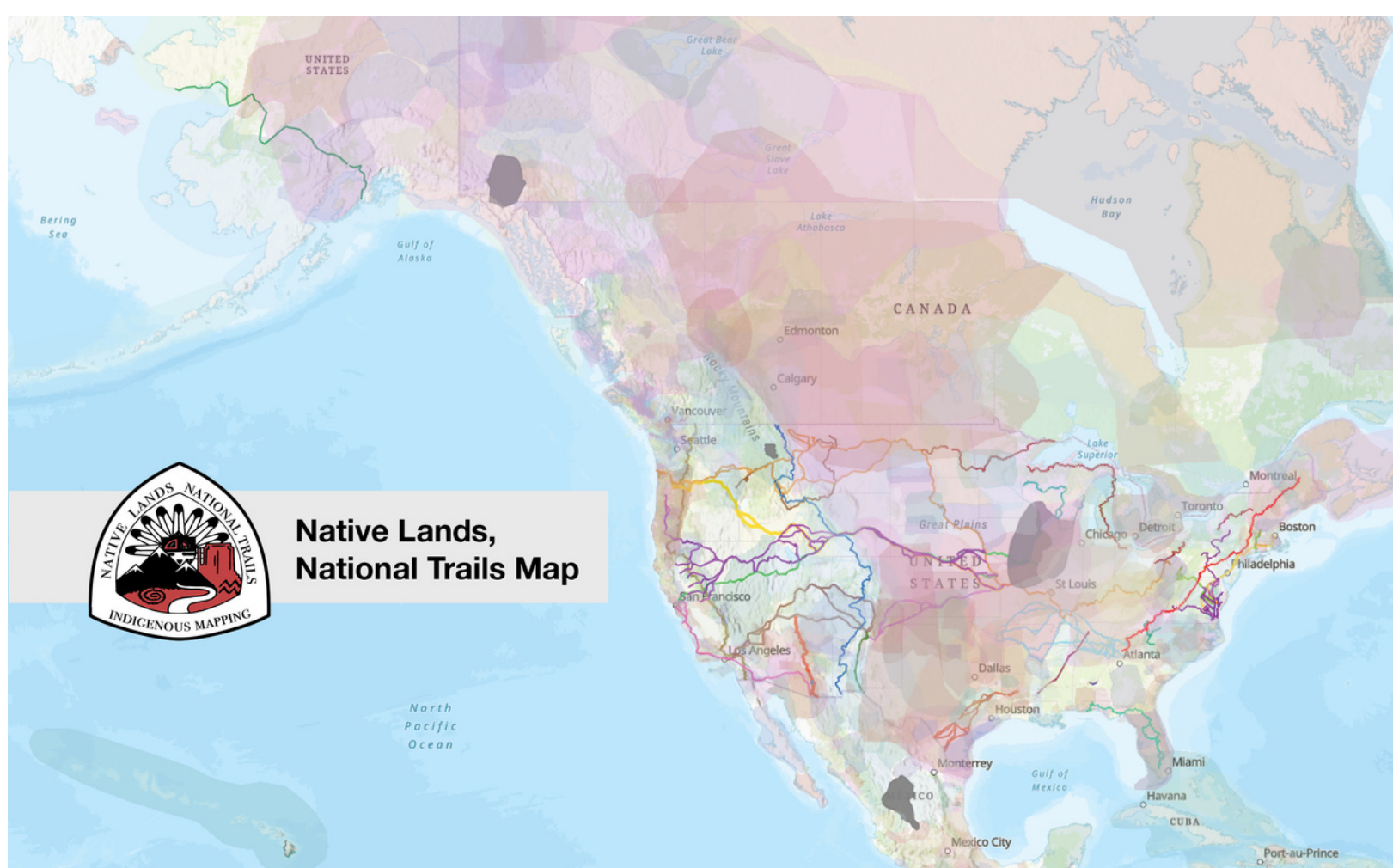
"Being able to incorporate and advocate for the continued partnership and collaboration with Indigenous nations contributes to the overall sustainability and support for the trails," says Etsate-Gashytewa. "Since time immemorial, Indigenous communities have stewarded the land and continue to do so to this day."

Weaving relationships with Indigenous communities into the efforts of trail organizations and advocates takes patience, openness and humility. Partnership in this way means including tribal perspectives from the very beginning. Poteete advises, "Don't make the mistake of having your whole project in mind and then having [the tribes] bless it after the fact." This is why relationship is emphasized in the Native Lands, National Trails resource; ongoing communication encourages appropriate consultation, collaboration and input from tribal nations.

To go beyond land acknowledgments and quotes, true collaboration and engagement requires, as Matthew Nelson says, "an open invitation and vision."



The 25th Annual National Trail of Tears Association Conference and Symposium attendees participating in Cherokee dance at Kituwah Mound. Photo by Troy Poteete.



NATIVE LANDS, NATIONAL TRAILS

Native Lands, National Trails includes an interactive GIS map hosted through Esri that serves as an educational tool and resource for understanding Ancestral Indigenous territories throughout the National Trails System. It also includes a webinar series providing tribal relations foundations and a resource guide with additional resources that trail organizations and Indigenous communities have created. The intent of the map is to provide a broad perspective of just how many communities the National Trails System crosses and to start crucial conversations about impacts, engagement and inclusivity of their stories.

This resource was created in collaboration with the Bureau of Land Management, Native Land Digital and Ancestral Lands Conservation Corps. Data on Indigenous territories is courtesy of Native Land Digital, and National Trails System data is provided by the National Park Service. These resources can be utilized by trail and Indigenous communities alike, and are completely free to use.

This work has been in progress for years, not beginning nor ending with Native Lands, National Trails. This resource is an ongoing project that will change and develop as more information and feedback is gathered. The Native Lands, National Trails project is open and welcome to edits, feedback and suggestions. From this starting point, there are many steps yet to come to bring Indigenous representation to the forefront of trail and land management.

Visit <https://bit.ly/PNTSNativeLands> to use the full suite of resources included in Native Lands, National Trails.