

WELCOME TO COUNTRY & EVENT BLESSINGS

Acknowledging Aboriginal Culture and Lands in WA



A Welcome to Country is both a celebration of Indigenous people's connection with the land and an acknowledgement of Aboriginal people as the traditional owners of the land in Australia.

This is a cultural protocol that has been performed by Australian Aboriginal people for thousands of years and continues to be celebrated today in various ways.

Traditionally, Welcome to Country introduces or 'welcomes' new people to an area. Today, it is often interchanged with an Indigenous 'blessing', used to acknowledge Aboriginal culture and land ownership at the start of a meeting or event.

The Committee for Perth respects and values Aboriginal culture and Indigenous people as the traditional custodians of the land in WA and encourages businesses and organisations to do the same.

This guide has been developed to assist businesses in understanding how to appropriately acknowledge Aboriginal people and culture in Western Australia.

What is Welcome to Country?

A Welcome to Country or event blessing acknowledges Aboriginal people as the traditional custodians of a region and Australia's first people. This protocol encourages the wider community to share in Aboriginal culture and heritage and allow traditional owners of the region to bless to an occasion.

Based on Aboriginal dreaming, Welcome to Country recognises ancestral spirits who created the boundaries and lands, allowing 'safe passage' to visitors.


For Indigenous Australians, these ceremonies not only celebrate and acknowledge culture but strengthen the spirit and awareness of their culture among other people.

Welcome to Country or an event blessing is not simply a protocol, it is a practice that draws people together and collectively connects them with an area or place.

The importance of Country to Indigenous Australians

By Richard Walley, OAM

Belonging to the land brings responsibilities and far reaching implications for Aboriginal Australians. Interpreting the 'oneness' with country, described by Indigenous Australians, provides a better understanding of Indigenous culture as well as a valuable perspective from which to gauge one's own position.



If you eat the food from your land, such as kangaroo, possum, goanna, birds, roots and grain, then the land becomes part of you and you become one with the land.

You are what you eat, is a good place to start. The story goes something like this...

If you eat the food from your land, such as kangaroo, possum, goanna, birds, roots and grain, then the land becomes part of you and you become one with the land. If you drink water and eat fish from rivers, then the water and the fish become part of you. Similarly, as the trees produce oxygen and you breathe the oxygen from their leaves, the trees become part of you.

From the Indigenous perspective, belonging is a two-way system. Parts of you will return to the land and rivers through bathing and skin shedding, through sweat and excretions and through burial or cremation. You too will again belong to the land.

It is an important and continuing flow that underlies and informs not only the biological but the spiritual and philosophical perspectives of Indigenous Australia.

This process also provides a context and insight into why Indigenous Australians are strongest in their own land. The links 'to' the place have spiritually, physically and culturally sustained those 'from' the place to determine their 'oneness' with the place.

When should Welcome to Country be delivered?

An event blessing or Welcome to Country should open all formal events, conferences, meetings and major activities, such as openings or launches.

Given the purpose of these protocols – to introduce and celebrate place and culture – they should naturally precede any formalities.

Usually, the master of ceremonies will welcome the guests and then introduce the Aboriginal elder or custodian from the area, who will conduct the blessing or Welcome to Country.

What does it involve?

Welcome to Country is very flexible and the form of delivery is usually guided by the individual performing the ceremony and the nature of the event.

An Aboriginal **event blessing** usually consists of a speech by an elder or nominated custodian from the area, who talks about the land and describes the culture of its traditional custodians, possibly through a description, story or centred on a topical issue.

The elder may discuss their presentation with you or they may choose to simply speak on the day. Usually, the speech will be given in both English and the Indigenous language of the area.

A formal **Welcome to Country** includes a presentation, as well as performance. This can be in the form of a song, dance or musical performance; a smoking or cleansing ceremony; or a combination of these.

The format will reflect the Indigenous protocols in a region or area, so event organisers should discuss details with the elders beforehand. If a particular performance or activity is preferred, this should be raised with the elders.

The type of ceremony used usually reflects the event's nature and size. The larger and more significant an event is, the greater the blessing or Welcome to Country.

At times, it may not be possible for traditional owners to provide a welcome. In this case, a senior representative at the event should recognise the traditional owners through an **acknowledgment of country**, at the opening of the event.

Appropriate wording for an acknowledgment of country could be:

"I respectfully acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which this event is taking place today – the <insert cultural group> people of Western Australia".



While the form of acknowledging Aboriginal culture and land varies for each event according to the needs of each organisation, the following should be used as a minimum:

- Lunch meeting: Acknowledgment of country
- Internal forum: Acknowledgment of country
- Industry forum: Acknowledgment of country and/or event blessing
- Event with local and interstate guests: Event blessing and/or Welcome to Country
- Event with international guests: Welcome to Country.

How do we organise a blessing or Welcome to Country?

The ceremony or blessing will be presented by a traditional owner of the land – usually a senior representative of the local Aboriginal community, an elder, or other nominated representative.

Not all Indigenous Australians can perform a Welcome to Country, so it is important to ensure the appropriate person is a recognised elder.

Details of organisations that can help identify an appropriate elder in different areas is included on the back of this guide.

When inviting Aboriginal people to events, it is important to remember that, like all communities there may be multiple and diverse groups in a region and a number of individuals or groups may need to be contacted to ensure all members are appropriately represented.

In addition, It may not always be appropriate to contact an elder and traditional custodian directly, so this should be discussed with a local organisation or group before contact is made. You may end up using a 'cultural broker' to discuss your initial requirements.

As with any occasion, contact should be made as early as possible, allowing plenty of time for discussions with the traditional owners.

The individuals performing the Welcome to Country must feel comfortable with the arrangements and organisers should be mindful that Welcome to Country is a right of the local Indigenous Australian as custodians of the land and not a privilege.

How should we respond?

The person performing the blessing or Welcome to Country is usually a senior, distinguished member of the Indigenous community and should always be treated as such.

A senior delegate at the meeting should meet with the elder/s before and after the event.

Likewise, immediately following the blessing or Welcome to Country, a senior representative should always respond by thanking and acknowledging the person who delivered the welcome.

Appropriate wording for a response to a traditional Welcome to Country might be: "I respectfully acknowledge the past and present traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting, the <insert cultural group> people. It is a privilege to be standing on <insert cultural group> country."

Is there anything else we need to be aware of?

In the case of a major event or initiative, a gift may be presented by the elder or to the elder. In this case, the gift should always be received or provided by a senior delegate.

Financial acknowledgement is also required. This should be discussed with the person conducting the blessing or Welcome to Country before any details are finalised for the event.

Payment may be made in advance or on the day. The amount will vary depending on the services provided and the requirements of each person.

If you require more information about payments, please speak with the organisations listed at the end of this brochure. However, the final costs will need to be negotiated and discussed between the individuals involved.

Are there any cultural issues we should consider?

Like any culture, Aboriginal cultural practices vary throughout the State and appropriate cultural protocols should be checked with traditional owners or Aboriginal organisations in the area.

For example, naming deceased people or speaking about gender specific issues in particular areas – classified as 'women's business' or 'men's business' – can be disrespectful or upsetting to Aboriginal people.

More information about these topics can be found at www.det.wa.gov.au

On the following page are details of organisations that can assist further.



Who should we contact?

If you need assistance determining what acknowledgement or type of ceremony is appropriate for your event, there are organisations that can be contacted for advice:

Department of Indigenous Affairs

Level 1, 197 St Georges Terrace
PERTH WA 6000
Tel: 08 9235 8000
www.dia.wa.gov.au

Office of Native Title WA

Level 2, 197 St Georges Terrace
PERTH WA 6000
Phone: 08 9222 9613
www.nativetitle.wa.gov.au

When identifying appropriate community members and elders to invite or participate in an event, you should contact the Native Title holder in the area. Native Title rights and interests are held by groups called PBCs (Prescribed Bodies Corporate) and regions have one or many PBCs.

The Office of the Registrar of Aboriginal Corporations holds the details of PBCs in each region and area and can be contacted for details:

Phone: 1800 622 431
Email: info@oric.gov.au

The Office of Native Title also has a list of PBCs on their website at:

www.nativetitle.wa.gov.au/pbcs.aspx

Where there isn't a specific PBC in an area, you should contact the relevant regional **Land and Sea Council**.

In many instances these organisations are located in remote locations and are not staffed full time, so it is recommended you allow sufficient time to seek their assistance – be patient and plan ahead, wherever possible.

Committee for Perth

The Committee for Perth is an influential member-based organisation driven by Perth's business and community members. It exists to promote and enable change that improves the cultural diversity, economic prosperity, sustainability and world-class amenity of metropolitan Perth.

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