

Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now Are words enough? Foundation goes 'Beyond Land Acknowledgements' 01GR1ZQHFRHFSKHXARR4RRN5NM

INTERVIEWER: Land acknowledgments have become commonplace over the past few decades. They appear on the websites of universities. They're read before corporate conferences and displayed in museums. Here's an example.

[AUDIO PLAYBACK]

- We respectfully acknowledge the territory--
- --in which we gather as the ancestral homelands of the Beothuk and--
- --the island of Newfoundland as the ancestral homelands--
- --of the Mi'kmaq and Beothuk.
- We would also like to recognize that Inuit of Nunatsiavut and Nunatukavut--
- And the Innu of Nitassinin and their ancestors as--
- --the original people of Labrador.
- We strive for respectful relationships with all the peoples of this province--
- --as we search for collective healing and true reconciliation--
- --and honor this beautiful land together.

[PLAYBACK ENDS]

INTERVIEWER: I'm going to say words are not enough, so little Canada's Indian Land Tenure Foundation has created a way for individuals and organizations to help tribal nations buy land. Chris Stainbrook is the president of the Indian Land Tenure Foundation. He's on the line right now to talk about this new initiative. Welcome to the program, Chris. How have you been?

CHRIS I've been good, cold, but good.

STAINBROOK:

INTERVIEWER: Yes, right, exactly.

[LAUGHTER]

CHRIS I have my own wind chill factor, you know.

STAINBROOK:

INTERVIEWER: Do you? [LAUGHS] Yeah, it's a--

CHRIS The warming--

STAINBROOK:

INTERVIEWER: --little bit crisp.

CHRIS --is out today.

STAINBROOK:

INTERVIEWER: Is it really?

[LAUGHTER]

Until at least sometime midweek, I bet. Thank you for being here. I appreciate your time. Say, before we talk about your effort, in your view, how much is reclamation of land about identity, ceremonies, connections to ancestors, traditional knowledge, and economics, sovereignty, or governance, or all of the above?

CHRIS [LAUGHS] And how long do you have?

STAINBROOK:

INTERVIEWER: I know. I know sorry, it's a big question.

CHRIS Well, there's-- land is the basis of what basically makes each tribe an individual nation, and if you don't have the
STAINBROOK: land, it's very difficult to be a sovereign nation. So it's got that baseline to it.

It's also got a value in terms of what it does to provide for tribal members and those living on the reservation. And then you've got a number of really culturally tied pieces to land, whether it's on reservation or off reservation. So it really is in the life of Indian people and the tribes across the country.

And beyond that, you've got, of course, the whole economic side of land, and so that plays in it as much as anything. And that was the reason much of the land got taken was around economics.

INTERVIEWER: How does land back, then, contribute to healing past wrongs?

CHRIS Well, I think-- there's a huge amount of land that was promised through treaties and executive orders, 90 million
STAINBROOK: acres across the country, approximately, oh, 2.1 million acres in Minnesota. And those lands were lost. To get the land back inside the reservation boundaries is of utmost importance just from the tribe being the tribe and native nations.

So it's really-- to get that land back is the important piece and the cultural sites off of those reservations that are out in the public domain. Those hold special religious and cultural values to Indian people, and that's important just to maintain our culture with.

INTERVIEWER: And you're not waiting for the Federal Government to get this work done, and so your foundation is helping the native tribes buy land that was originally protected by these treaties.

CHRIS That's correct. Now, we've-- I think Indian country gave up waiting for the Federal Government to do that some
STAINBROOK: time ago. Basically, from our perspective, we're down to pretty much willing-seller, willing-buyer transactions, and so our foundation is set up to help finance some of those purchases.

INTERVIEWER: Now, I understand the first check to the fund was from a local church, a parish, who called it an act of reparation. Tell us more about that.

CHRIS STAINBROOK: Well, we were in a discussion with some folks about how an entity might live up to their statement around land acknowledgment. And I was in a discussion with six of these guys, and they were saying, well, what's missing? And I basically said to them what's missing is a statement of action.

And at the end of most of these acknowledgments, they just kind of trail off into flowery words. Well, what's the action that's going to be taken now that you've acknowledged the taking? And that led to other discussions.

And eventually, the church and congregation at Holy Trinity came through with a sizable gift, which then caused us to look at what have we provided that could be the vehicle for other smaller gifts from some of the smaller groups that had a land acknowledgment statement but didn't see themselves being able to buy and return land. Could we have a fund, then, that set up and they could contribute to it and we would purchase land through that fund?

INTERVIEWER: Mhmm, OK, I understand. So can I ask you about maybe some of the wealthier nations, tribal nations, that are coming to mind, say, in Minnesota? Can-- would you help them? Are they on their own? Are you mostly helping smaller tribal nations?

CHRIS STAINBROOK: Well, some of them-- some of the wealthier ones, we-- obviously, they don't need our financing to do some of their purchases, and so we're kind of midrange size. And location is a big thing, so where you don't have gaming tribes that are doing well, you can-- we end up financing a number of purchases for those tribes.

And they have sizable lands that have been taken, some of the large reservations of the great plains, for instance. Many of those have lost at least a million acres, if not more, over time.

INTERVIEWER: So Chris, when you look at a big map of the United States and you're starting to buy up some of this land, what's, say, the goal in the next, I don't know, 5-10 years? How much land do you have that you've purchased, that you've bought back, and how much are you looking at?

CHRIS STAINBROOK: Well, we're looking at the full 90-million acres that are inside the reservation boundaries across the country that were lost through the allotment process. We've got 150-year mission statement from our staff's perspective. We've bought back one just right around 150,000 acres, and while that doesn't sound like very much when you're shooting for 90 million, our abilities, our capabilities have been growing the last 20 years. And so we're doing more purchases now than we had been doing, say, five years ago.

And the other thing, land is expensive, so that 150,000 acres, we basically leveraged about \$240 million to make that amount of purchase. So it's not cheap when you're buying it, and it causes us to be raising capital on a regular basis.

INTERVIEWER: Are you finding more buy-in, if that's the right word to use-- more understanding is a better word to use-- from non-Natives about what you're doing, and therefore, they're also kicking in?

CHRIS STAINBROOK: Yes, there's-- yes, I would say, generally, yes simply because we've been doing education for the last 20 years with about 80% of our resources going to education about how the land got this way and why it was taken or assumed through some federal action. So people understand that more, and they also understand how detrimental it is to Indian people and the tribes.

And so I think there's more of a positive response than we've had, say, 10, 15, 20 years ago. But it's clearly, if you are out in the general public, we aren't America's favorite topic. Having the tribes get their land back, that scares an awful lot of people.

INTERVIEWER: But as you say, it's important work, and Chris, I appreciate your time. Thank you so much for being with us.

CHRIS Certainly. I enjoyed it.

STAINBROOK:

INTERVIEWER: Chris Stainbrook is the president of the Indian Land Tenure Foundation. You can find more information about this topic at sahanjournal.com. That's a nonprofit digital newsroom dedicated to reporting for immigrants and communities of color in Minnesota.