

A large crowd of people is gathered for a protest. In the foreground, a large red banner with white text reads "HONOR TREATY RIGHTS". Behind the banner, many people are holding various signs. Some signs say "PROTECT THE WATER DEFEND THE LAND", "WE ARE HERE TO PROTECT", "WATER IS LIFE", "DEFEND THE LAND", "NURSES STAND WITH STANDING ROCK", "NO PIPELINES", "IDLE NO MORE", and "STAND WITH STANDING ROCK". The background shows city buildings and trees.

Understanding Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Professional Responsibility

Lecture 1

LIS 534: Indigenous Systems of Knowledge

3 credit hour class

University of Washington

Information School

Professor: Clarita Lefthand-Begay

Learning objectives:

- Explain **relational accountability** as a professional and ethical framework.
- Identify **risks of extractive** research and institutional practice.
- Recognize core **professional responsibilities** when working with Indigenous knowledge systems.

Indigenous People



**United
Nations**

- According to the UN as of 2025-2026, there are now an estimated 476 million indigenous people globally
- They represent more than 5,000 distinct cultures and speak the vast majority of the world's approximately 7,000 languages
- Indigenous peoples live across 90 countries globally
- Indigenous peoples make up roughly 6.2% of the global population.
 - Have and continue to self-govern
 - Governments are rooted in a local world-view or cosmology



United Nations. (n.d.). A world in faces [Virtual exhibit]. <https://www.un.org/en/exhibits/exhibit/world-in-faces>

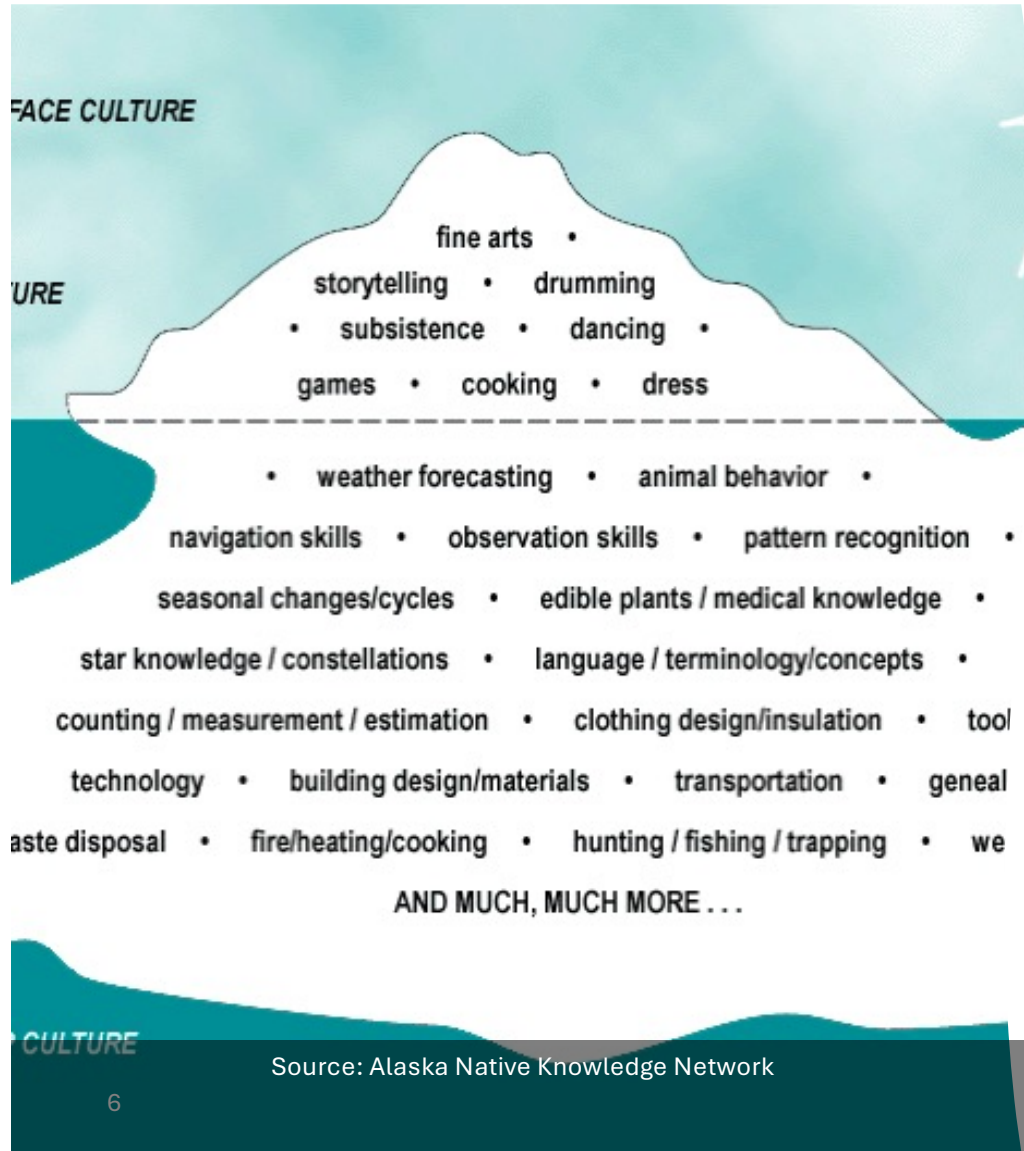


The World In Faces



Ways of knowing

- Traditional Knowledge (TK)
- Indigenous knowledge systems (IKS)
 - Indigenous systems of knowledge (ISK)
 - Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK)
- Native knowledges
 - Diné knowledge
 - Hopi knowledge
- There are some similarities but also some differences in these ways of knowing

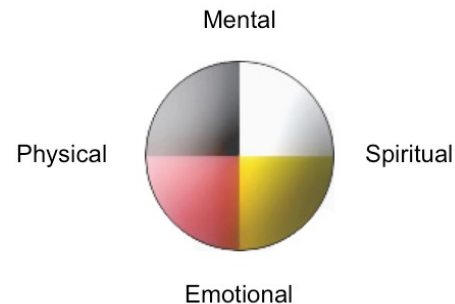


What is Indigenous systems of knowledge?

- Based on
 - Natural Law
 - Language
 - Land
 - Systems of life

Definition of Traditional Knowledge

- Traditional Knowledge is the total understanding by indigenous people of their **relationship** to the earth and the universe, and the knowledge inherent within that relationship.
- This knowledge includes the spiritual, physical, emotional, and mental aspects of a person and related components of the earth and universe to these aspects.
 - The Cree call this “Ininiw Kiskentamowin.”



Stewart Hill, 2008

Definition of Traditional Knowledge

How do Native people define traditional knowledge?

- It is practical **common sense** based on teachings and experiences passed on from generation to generation.
- It is **knowing the country**. It covers knowledge of the environment - snow, ice, weather, resources - and the relationships between things.
- It is **holistic**. It cannot be compartmentalized and cannot be separated from the people who hold it. It is rooted in the spiritual health, culture and language of the people. It is a way of life.
- Traditional knowledge is an authority system. It sets out the **rules governing the use of resources** - respect, an obligation to share. It is dynamic, cumulative and stable. It is truth.
- Traditional knowledge is a way of life -wisdom is using traditional knowledge in good ways. It is using the **heart and the head together**. It comes from the spirit in order to survive.
- It gives credibility to the people.



Epistemicide

The loss of fundamental knowledge systems, including cultures, languages, religions is referred to as “epistemicide,” usually a result of colonial incursion and impact on Indigenous ways of life.

The term epistemicide literally translates to the “killing of knowledge systems.”

Key aspects of epistemicide

- **Systematic Erasure:** It is not merely the passive loss of culture, but an active, often violent process that destroys knowledge producers and their ways of life.
- **Colonial Roots:** Historically rooted in colonial expansion, which operated through theft, dispossession, and epistemic injustice.

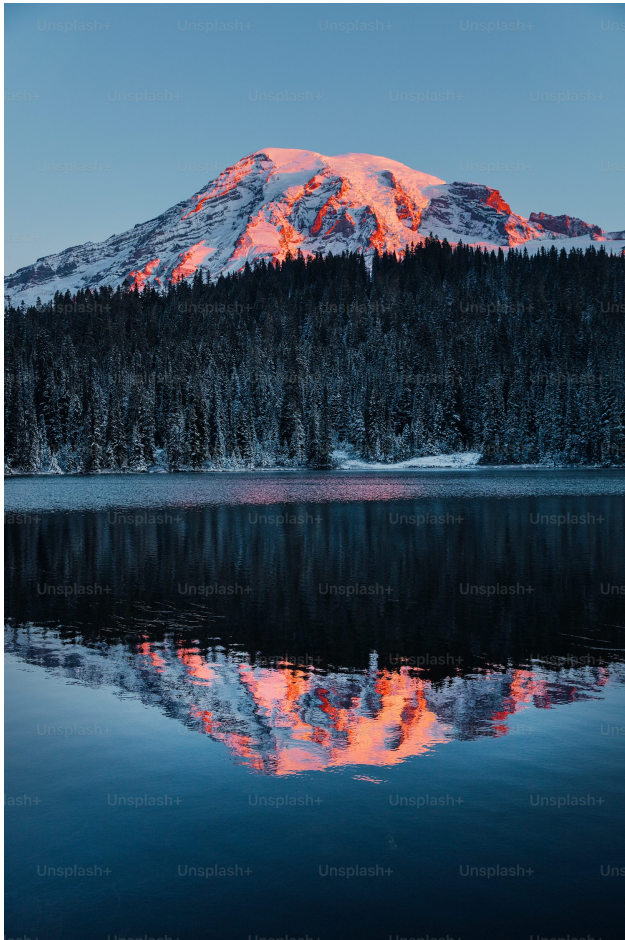


Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe sees benefits from removal of dams



- **Mechanisms:** Driven by factors including formal **education systems**, religious conversion, land-use changes, and the imposition of dominant Western scientific paradigms.
- **Impact:** Leads to the loss of biodiversity knowledge, sustainable practices, and cultural identity, as described by

Indigenous Knowledge as Relational, Not Extractable



- **Knowledge systems are embedded in community relationships, place, and governance**, not just stored information
- Indigenous knowledge transmission (stories, songs, ceremonies, land practices) **encodes responsibilities**, not just content





Thank you and see you next
week!