

Interviewing Elders

Guidelines from the
National Aboriginal Health Organization



Reporters wishing to cover events involving Elders' teachings need to be aware of some simple protocols for approaching Elders and determining how information can be used in news articles, voice clips, or photos/video.

Aboriginal Peoples have great respect for the wisdom gained, over the course of individual lives, but age is not necessarily the defining characteristic of an Elder. Individuals recognized as Elders have earned the respect of their community. Elders are people whose actions and words convey consistency, balance, harmony, and wisdom in their teachings. Elders hold invaluable knowledge and skills. There are specific ways to share them with others.

The National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO) is committed to affirming traditional Aboriginal healing practices and medicines and ensuring that these practices receive recognition and respect.

First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Elders are integral to the National Aboriginal Health Organization's (NAHO's) conferences, regional gatherings, and other media events. The Elders play a vital role as participants, performing ceremonies, making presentations, or providing guidance.

NAHO suggests the following guidelines.

Tobacco and Offerings

First Nations Elders and **Métis Elders** often have helpers who work with them and receive training. You may ask the helper how to approach a particular Elder since each Nation has its own tradition. The helper will tell you if a gift of tobacco should be offered when approaching the Elder before an interview.

Tobacco is one of the four sacred plants. The other three are sweetgrass, sage, and cedar. A gift of tobacco is sometimes offered in recognition of the wisdom the Elder will share. Tobacco can be given as cigarettes, pouch tobacco, or tobacco ties (loose tobacco wrapped in a small square cloth). Offering tobacco to an Elder establishes a relationship between you and the Elder.



Inuit Elders do not expect a tobacco offering. Tobacco is not used ceremonially in Inuit culture. A small gift may be offered in appreciation for the Elder's time and assistance.

To keep traditional knowledge and the oral tradition alive, Inuit Elders are generally willing to share stories and answer questions when asked. Since many Inuit Elders are more comfortable speaking in Inuktitut, ask their assistant/interpreter to help you with the interview and translation.

In any case, a small gift or offering is usually well received in recognition of the knowledge being shared and the time being taken by the Elder in providing guidance.

Ceremonies

For traditional spiritual ceremonies, **First Nations Elders** and **Métis Elders** prefer that recordings and photographs not be taken. Instead, they ask that everyone participate in the ceremonies. Honour songs are performed to honour a person for different reasons. Everyone stands during an honour song and removes headwear. Smudging is a prayer ceremony in which particular medicines (plants) are burned as an offering to the Creator and the Earth. Ceremonies such as smudging and honour songs are private ceremonies held in a communal setting; they are not public events.



Inuit Elders generally allow photographs to be taken during the lighting of the qulliq, which symbolizes light and the warmth of family and community. A qulliq is a traditional seal oil lamp that was used for heating the igloo or qammaq (sod house) and for cooking.

In all cases, whether First Nations, Métis, or Inuit, explicit consent must be received from the Elder for photographs, audio, and/or video recordings.

Do not touch sacred objects used by Elders (pipes, qulliq, eagle feathers, medicine pouches, etc.) unless the Elder gives you permission. Photographs of these objects must be cleared by the Elder.

General

Always use respect, ask permission, seek clarification if there is something you do not understand, and follow the direction you are given.

A sense of humility is also very useful. Many Elders teach that humility needs to be reflected in the way individuals present themselves and interact. Appropriate attire is a significant gesture.

Being loud, interrupting, and rushing the conversation is seen as rude and may not get the answers requested.

Aboriginal teachings provided in a public setting such as a conference are not considered public domain or general knowledge. If you wish to use an Elder's words, or to report on the proceedings, ask the Elder and/or organizers before you act.

If you have any doubt, ask the Elder involved, the helper or assistants, or one of the organizers for assistance with your request. Each situation is different. Do not presume permission is granted for everything all the time. Permission must be sought in each situation and should never be considered to be implied from previous interactions or use.

Additional Sources

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