



# Animal Rescue in Tribal Nations

- The Native American Humane Society (NAHS) works to empower Native American communities to become healthier, happier, and safer by providing information, support and resources for animal care programs in Indian country. NAHS is composed of tribal members and their allies, assisting tribal communities to resolve their issues with animals. NAHS acts as the bridge between tribal communities and animal welfare service providers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), foundations, and other agencies. We believe that healing our animals is part of healing ourselves and our communities.



# Ten Steps to Culturally Aware Animal Rescue



- Many animal rescue groups work on United States tribal land helping to provide care for dogs, cats, and horses. Animal rescues provide food and shelter or medical help to animals living in the community, and also take companion animals out of the nation to find them new homes. Animal rescues are often small, privately run organizations that depend on donations, adoption fees, and volunteers to carry out their important work with their tribal partners. As dogs are generally identified as presenting the most challenges to tribal communities, these steps will focus mainly on dog rescue on Tribal lands but the concept of respect for cultural norms and adherence to Tribal regulations applies to any animal rescue and advocacy work.

In the United States, there are many animal rescue groups working with dogs on tribal lands – some groups have been invited by Tribal government, some have individual relationships with owners, and others work uninvited on Indian reservations. Many animal rescues include finding homes outside the tribal community for unwanted, homeless, sick, or injured dogs as a foundation of their work. Some groups work exclusively with dogs from tribes and have developed practices and protocols that demonstrate a deep understanding and appreciation for the dogs and their people. Though relationships between Native American people and dogs have been disrupted by European colonization - including displacement and assimilation, and the loss of language and culture - healing relationships with animals, helps to heal people by reminding them that all life is sacred. Animal rescues can play a role in rebuilding these relationships by providing culturally applicable assistance that focusses on helping the community as a whole - individual dogs and guardians, leadership, and other animals.



*Every rescue who is removing dogs to rehome outside the nation should strive to do so humanely, ethically, effectively, and in a transparent manner. Here are ten steps to guide rescues when providing dog rescue in Indian country:*

## **1. Learn about the community:**

Getting to know the community demonstrates interest and respect and is necessary for working successfully in any Native American community. Learn about the nation - geography, demographics, economy, tribal council, etc. – to understand how to be effective and to understand the community's strengths and challenges. Develop relationships with

community members and take time to experience the culture and uncover the norms. Learn about colonialism, US government assimilation policies, and intergenerational trauma and how this history continues to impact people today. Find out if other rescue groups have worked in the nation in the past, what they did, and how successful they were. Recognize that the nation may have had negative experiences with another rescue and may be cautious about working together. One group's mistakes can become the next group's responsibility.

## 2. Complete cultural competency training:

Rescue personnel, especially those who are working with community members, should have training that includes cultural safety and humility, and trauma informed approaches. Team members require working knowledge of, and experience with, dogs within tribal culture and must demonstrate meaningful and appropriate interactions with community members. Whether rescue is assisting dogs who are staying with their guardians or taking dogs out of the community, every interaction with a community member, two or four legged, is a reflection of the rescue.



## 3. Gain permission to enter tribal land:

Permission from Tribal government is necessary in order to enter and carry out any kind of animal rescue work within the borders of Tribal lands. There are 325 American Indian reservations in the U.S. with their own Tribal government and local regulations. Rescues are required to contact tribal headquarters to

find out the specific steps that are required for permission. Some tribes require rescues to register with Tribal law enforcement or public safety departments and to request an access permit. Additionally, some tribes may require the rescues to present a proposal to tribal council before granting access to the community. Similar to any government bureaucracy, it can take time to maneuver



through Tribal government. Respecting the need for permission and following protocols to obtain it is part of advocating for animals and their guardians effectively and in good faith. Whether helping dogs in the community or taking them out, anyone working on tribal land requires permission to do so.

## 4. Partner with the nation:

It is the responsibility of the rescue to build partnerships with Tribal government and community members, and to include them in decision-making and implementation. Rescues must work with the community to decide how best to use animal rescue as a tool to help with identified problems, especially with dogs. Many Native American people and communities have had rescue groups go onto their land and take their dogs without consulting them or working with them. Sharing knowledge, accessing resources, and creating opportunities and jobs can help to build capacity and improve the lives of dogs and their people at home. Community members hold their own vision for how they want to live with dogs and they are the true agents of long-term change.



**5. Gather information about dogs and their people:**

Rescues can better meet the needs of the dogs and dog guardians when they understand the characteristics, behaviors, and needs of individual dogs and the population as a whole. This helps to: a) determine if dog rescue is an appropriate tool and how to best use it, and b) measure the impact in the community after each rescue intervention. Whether dogs are spayed or neutered and vaccinated, what breeds are in the community, if they are tied or live inside, how they behave, where they come from, how they die, how many are removed every month, how people feel about them and what they perceive as dog issues, all contribute to how dog problems are described by community members. The term ‘overpopulation’ is more often than not an oversimplification of the reality of dog problems on nation land. To appreciate the complexity of how people and dogs live together and affect each other requires gathering detailed information on the dogs and an understanding of their owners. It is imperative to request permission from tribal government to gather data on dog guardianship



so as to better understand the public health and safety challenges. There is a history of harmful data harvesting within tribal communities that has made Native Americans justifiably wary and closed to such inquiries. Once permission has been granted to gather data, groups are encouraged to carry out door-to-door surveys to learn about individual dogs in a household and to garner insights from guardians. These interactions serve many purposes including building relationships, sharing information, and learning more about guardian needs. Cross-reference this with information from

dog registration, street surveys, bite data, and information from people gleaned at meetings and through conversations. Look for ownership patterns within families (e.g. cycling through puppies annually) and within communities (e.g. free roaming dogs) and create a database with information about any dogs who are relinquished including age, sex, name, color, spayed/neutered, guardian information, etc. Collecting and sharing information with the tribe is a way to monitor whether dog rescue is meeting its objectives and is key to establishing a sustainable advocacy program.

**6. Prioritize dog relinquishment rather than dog removal:**

It is respectful, ethical, and transparent for rescues to create opportunities for guardians to relinquish their dogs rather than for the rescue to remove them – even if Tribal leadership has sanctioned the removal of dogs. Talking to guardians affords rescue the opportunity to find out why the dog is being given up and if there is something the rescue can do to keep the dog with their person. Helping owners to provide for their dogs helps to minimize turnover and is part of creating a stable, healthy population. If a rescue does not have a signed relinquishment form for each dog from the primary caretaker, animal control (who has impounded the dog for

the required amount of time), or an agent in the Tribe who has spoken to the guardian, the dog should stay in the community. With no written permission, the dog should be posted where the guardian can find and claim the dog, or give permission for the dog to be rehomed. Signed relinquishment forms protect guardians from having their dogs taken without their approval, and they protect the rescue by proving a formal transference of ownership. Medical, behavioral, and lifestyle information can also be captured at relinquishment and shared with foster or adoptive homes - dog name, age, sex, breed(s), color; number of litters; if the dog lived inside or outside, tied up or free roaming; behavior around other dogs, cats, kids; known medical or behavioral issues; body condition at time of relinquishment; guardian name, address, contact; etc. Relinquishment information should feed into the overall data set for dogs and guardians in the community and reviewed with the partner tribe on a regular basis.

### 7. Build a team with exceptional dog sense:

Dog rescues should model the highest standard of handling, care, and safety when interacting with dogs in the community, in transport, and in rescue outside the community. Rescues who work with a particular community often gain a



deep understanding of the dogs and can assess how to best support them, whether they stay in the community with their guardian or are relinquished. For dogs who come out of the community, it is the rescue's responsibility to meet their individual needs by placing them in appropriate foster or adoptive homes, or transferring them to another rescue who can. Not all dogs are good candidates for rehoming

outside the Tribe and not all rescues are suited for working with reservation dogs. The community and the dog population should be healthier, happier, and more stable when working with a dog rescue.

### 8. Develop a logistics plan for removing dogs:

The logistics of picking up, transporting and dispersing rescued dogs outside the Tribe



are extensive and rescues are responsible for the comfort and safety of each dog until they reach their destination. Logistics depend on the location of the community or village, time of year, mode of transport, and experience of the rescue. Preparing and moving dogs requires: permission to enter Tribal lands, signed relinquishment forms for each dog, humane handling of dogs and understanding of federal, state, and county requirements for animal safety, meeting flight regulations and organizing transport to and from the airports, setting up vans or other appropriate transport vehicles (e.g. crates, temperature), setting a travel route, booking hotels, exercising and caring for dogs along the way, setting up quarantine, and handing over dogs to partner rescues. Every step includes multiple details and can require different competencies and experience from different team members. It is highly recommended that rescues mentor with other rescues who have successfully and respectfully rehomed dogs from a native community. Taking dogs from their families and transporting them elsewhere is stressful and can even be traumatic. Rescues should understand that dogs are leaving everything that is familiar to them and will need time and attention to transition successfully.





### 9. Social media and communications:

How dog rescues communicate their work and share it externally is as important as the work itself. Rescues can cause harm to the communities they aim to serve if they are not respectful in how they describe their work. Social media in particular is a powerful way of increasing awareness about rescue work especially for groups with few resources and a passion to help animals. However, describing dogs as victims, portraying guardians as uncaring, using graphic photos of sick or injured dogs on a regular basis, or telling stories about how dogs need to be ‘rescued’ all contribute to a negative narrative of Native American life. Helping dogs does not mean denigrating their people. When sharing rescue work, include the broader context of the community, be thoughtful about how the dogs and people are portrayed, ask peoples’ permission to use their pictures or words before posting them, and invite the tribe to read communications before they go live.

### 10. Understand the role rescue plays in solving dog problems:

Dog rescue is a popular intervention offered to, and welcomed by, many Native American communities. However, dog rescue alone will not resolve dog problems, and rescues should understand and be explicit about the limitations of rescue not just the benefits of it when networking with leadership and community members. Removing dogs can be one piece of a nation’s dog management program but only a comprehensive program can disrupt the underlying problems that contribute to the need to remove dogs in the first place.

Any work with Native American dogs must honor the lives of the dogs and the people who live with them. To achieve this, dog rescue should be respectful and transparent, and used as a last resort rather than a first response. Dogs can and do thrive in their nation families and rescues can help guardians to keep their dogs by providing the support and services to help them do so.

