



# Reclaiming Indigenous Oral Histories

## Draft Recommendations (3-14-2025)

Recent discussions on cultural sovereignty have centered on the need for Indigenous communities to have greater agency over their oral histories while recognizing the role that collecting institutions can play in ensuring respectful stewardship. Historically, many Indigenous oral histories have been extracted, misinterpreted, and housed in institutions without the guidance of the communities from which they originate. Moving forward, meaningful collaboration and shared stewardship agreements are key to ensuring that oral histories are accessed, interpreted, and preserved in ways that align with Indigenous cultural values and protocols.

Through programs, research initiatives, and direct engagement with Native communities and collecting institutions, ATALM has developed recommendations to guide this important work. These recommendations are a starting point and are meant to spark further discussions.

## 1. For Collecting Institutions Holding Native Oral Histories

- **Ethical Access:** Access to recordings should be determined on Indigenous terms, recognizing that some histories are sacred and intended for specific audiences. Institutions should consult directly with the communities from which these histories originate to seek guidance on appropriate access, use, and potential return.
- **Shared Stewardship:** Institutions should establish formal agreements with Native communities that align with Indigenous knowledge protocols, ensuring that tribal voices shape decision-making around their histories.
- **Ethical Returns:** Institutions should be prepared to return recordings when requested, recognizing the inherent rights of Indigenous peoples to their cultural narratives.

## 2. For Native Communities

- Advocate for Policy Changes:
- Work toward legal and policy frameworks—such as those outlined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)—that recognize Indigenous sovereignty over oral histories.
- Establish Clear Points of Contact: Tribes should designate official representatives or cultural liaisons to facilitate respectful engagement with institutions seeking guidance on access and stewardship.
- Engage in Negotiations: Work directly with institutions to establish control over access, metadata, and potential returns.
- Develop Legal Protections: Incorporate oral history protections into tribal governance structures to ensure that Native voices remain in control of their narratives.
- Strengthen Community-Led Archives: Invest in tribally managed oral history initiatives that reclaim and preserve cultural narratives for future generations.
- Raise Public Awareness: Organize community events, exhibits, educational workshops, and digital storytelling initiatives to celebrate and educate others on the significance of oral histories.

## 3. For Funders

- Sustain Long-Term Support: Establish ongoing funding streams to help Native communities reclaim, protect, and share their oral histories.
- Support Contemporary Storytelling: Provide funding for Indigenous-led projects that document contemporary oral histories alongside historical collections.

## 4. For the Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums

- Expand Training Programs: Offer workshops and resources on oral history preservation, metadata best practices, and digital archiving tailored to Native communities.

- Advocate for Stronger Policies: Support policy development that ensures Indigenous ownership of oral histories and promotes institutional accountability.
- Develop Ethical Stewardship Guidelines: Create national standards for the ethical care and access of Native oral histories.
- Facilitate Tribal-Institutional Partnerships: Encourage and support collaborations that promote shared stewardship and direct consultation.
- Provide Resources & Toolkits: Equip Native communities with the knowledge and tools to establish and sustain their own oral history archives.
- Increase Funding Opportunities: Work with philanthropic organizations to expand grant programs that support Indigenous-led oral history projects.

## Next Steps

This work is ongoing. We encourage all stakeholders to be part of the conversation. If you have questions, suggestions, or ways to support this initiative, please email [president@atalm.org](mailto:president@atalm.org).

