



Institute for Environmental Sovereignty

Strategic Plan



Table of Contents



Branding	3
<i>Mission Statement</i>	3
<i>Tagline</i>	3
<i>Core Objectives</i>	3
<i>Logo</i>	3
<i>Webpage</i>	3
Oversight and Accountability	4
The Green Team	5
Projects	8
<i>Establishing a Foundation</i>	8
<i>Building a Movement</i>	8
Programming	13
Conferences	14

Branding



Mission Statement

The National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) Institute for Environmental Sovereignty (IES or “The Institute”) advances Tribal Nations’ leadership in natural resource governance and environmental stewardship; the safeguarding of Indigenous Peoples’ cultural heritage linked to the landscape and natural environment; and innovative Indigenous-led approaches to environmental protection.

Tagline

“Governance, Heritage, Innovation.”

Core Objectives

- **Track** environmental matters of greatest concern to Indian Country.
- **Carry out** in-depth research and analysis of environmental and natural resource policy, law, programs, and action, at all levels and types of government that impact Indian Country, treaty resources, cultural heritage, and tribal communities’ health and wellness.
- **Advocate** for greater tribal sovereignty over and stewardship of critically important natural resources.
- **Convene** Tribal Nation leaders, partners, and supporters around Indian Country’s greatest environmental problems, solutions, and opportunities to create communities of practice.

Logos



Website: www.ncai.org/IES

Oversight and Accountability



NCAI Land & Natural Resources Committee and Climate Action Task Force

The Institute reports on its activities to these standing NCAI entities. The Committee and Task Force meet several times a year at NCAI's Conventions.

Steering Committee

The IES Steering Committee embodies thematic representation with ecoregional diversity and representation from youth, elders, and tribal government leaders. Members are tasked with reviewing key deliverables, serving as IES ambassadors, providing oversight and feedback, and keeping IES apprised of important developments in Indian Country within the subject matter domains of the environment and natural resources.

The full Steering Committee comprises 18 members across three subcommittees. Each subcommittee consists of six members. Members work for Tribal Nations, all of whom are NCAI members in good standing. These members possess subject matter expertise within the IES themes of Governance, Heritage, and Innovation. These fifteen seats ensure every NCAI Region is represented. Three additional seats, allocated across the three subcommittees, adds representation from youth, elders, and tribal government leaders.



The Green Team



Cynthia R. Harris (Director)

Harris brings to NCAI's leadership team an extensive background in public policy and legal research focused on tribal and Indigenous sovereignty, climate change adaptation and mitigation, water quality and conservation, and green infrastructure. Earlier in her career, Harris worked at the Environmental Law Institute and in San Diego local government. She serves on the Standing Committee of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine's Environmental Health Matters Initiative, the City of San Diego Resiliency Advisory Board, and the American Bar Association's Indigenous Law Committee. Harris received a juris doctor from the New York University School of Law and earned her bachelor of arts at the University of California, San Diego.



Angela Medina Garcia, Ph.D. (Senior Research Associate)

Dr. Medina Garcia currently leads an effort to understand the environmental priorities of tribes across Indian Country. This effort will provide scientific evidence to guide NCAI's policy advocacy and inform federal agencies and the philanthropic community on tribal environmental priorities. Dr. Medina Garcia is a scientist with expertise in biology, ecology, behavior, experimental psychology, statistics, and social science. She earned a National Science Foundation Research Postdoctoral Research Fellowship in the area of Broadening Participation of Groups Underrepresented in Biology, and has contributed to the advancement of Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion by mentoring students and writing papers on the subject. Dr. Medina Garcia earned a Ph.D. in Biology from New Mexico State University for her work on avian cognition and mate choice. She is committed to using her scientific training to empower Tribal Nations to lead solutions to the climate and biodiversity loss crisis.

The Green Team



Viswatej Attili, Ph.D. (Environmental Analyst)

Dr. Attili's work at the Institute focuses on utilizing advanced technologies such as drones, satellites, artificial intelligence, smart sensors, 3D printing, and virtual reality for environmental monitoring and protection. His expertise lies in environmental monitoring and implementation, with a strong emphasis on sustainability. Dr. Attili has a robust background in managing government funding and leading initiatives aimed at assessing air and water quality, mitigating climate change impacts, and promoting sustainable energy solutions. He has also worked on patented solutions for arsenic cleanup and carbon dioxide reduction, demonstrating his proactive approach to environmental stewardship. Dr. Attili's collaborations with tribal communities, governments, educational institutions, and funding organizations reflect his commitment to implementing impactful environmental projects. His academic journey includes a B.Tech in Information Technology from Vellore Institute of Technology (VIT), India, and both a Master's and Ph.D. in Rangeland Ecology and Watershed Management from the University of Wyoming. Beyond his professional role, Dr. Attili teaches yoga, leads backpacking trips, and served as Secretary and webmaster for the Florence Medical Society and Alliance.



Sarah Wilson (Environmental Analyst)

Wilson co-leads the Institute's inaugural 50-state report card project that aims to evaluate how well states advance tribal sovereignty and self-determination on a number of environmental issues. She brings experience in research, analysis, project and data management, and grant writing and has worked across multiple industries, including civil engineering, archaeology, sustainable agriculture, and food systems. Prior to joining NCAI, Wilson secured over \$3.4 million in state and federal grants for sustainable agriculture, and helped collect and evaluate socioeconomic and ecological data on payment for ecosystem services. Her graduate research was two-fold, considering both the relationship between people and their surroundings and analyzing the effectiveness of using a drone to collect photogrammetric data for modeling cultural landscapes in Nunatsiavut (Labrador, Canada). Wilson is interested in continuing to put Indigenous knowledge frameworks at the forefront for the management and protection of natural and cultural resources. She holds an M.A. in Archaeology from the Memorial University of Newfoundland, and a Certificate in Public Policy from the University of Montana.

The Green Team



Charlie Thayer (Research Analyst)

Thayer (Lac Courte Oreilles/White Earth Anishinaabe) currently focuses on Just Transition efforts with Tribal Nations. Prior to joining NCAI, he worked with the Indian Land Tenure Foundation providing outreach activities and consultation with tribes about the American Indian Probate Reform Act, the Cobell Land Buy-Back Program, and the Conservation Reserve Program. His outreach focused on educating Native farmers and landowners about options to gain financial and environmental sustainability with their operations. Thayer graduated from Hamline University in 2012 and the University of Minnesota in 2016.



Ben Gray (Policy Lead)

Gray co-leads the Institute's inaugural 50-state report card project, evaluating how well each state's environmental policies advance tribal sovereignty. Prior to joining NCAI, he served as a law clerk at the Connecticut Superior Court in Danbury, Connecticut. Gray's experience includes his time at the Narwhal Tusk Research Project, where he coordinated the translation and integration of Inuit and Greenlandic elders' traditional knowledge into a book about Narwhal. He ran a successful gardening business from his home in northwestern Connecticut, focusing on organic flower and vegetable gardening. Gray is also a published biologist, having discovered two algal species new to science as an undergraduate student. He holds both a Juris Doctor and a Master of Environmental Law and Policy degrees from Vermont Law School, as well as a B.Sc. from Mount Allison University in New Brunswick, Canada.

Laying the Groundwork

Environmental Priorities Across Indian Country - The Institute launched this study in an effort to learn about Indian Country's environmental priorities today. This includes Tribal Nations' environmental challenges, the barriers Tribal Nations face in overcoming these challenges, and both existing and potential tribal-led solutions and innovations. The results will inform NCAI's recommendations for the federal budget, provide solid grounds to advocate for policy change, help IES better inform and educate federal policymakers and agencies, and assist government agencies and philanthropy in providing more targeted support. The data will drive the Institute's projects, programs, and activities moving forward. This study will be conducted every 5 years.

Building a Movement

Each Institute project and program will align with one or more of the following three themes: **Governance**, **Heritage**, and **Innovation**. Below are several projects, both underway and proposed.



GOVERNANCE

- **State Report Card (SRC)** - The SRC evaluates whether and how each state advances tribal sovereignty and self-determination across a range of critical environmental and natural resource policies. It is designed to draw state policymakers' attention to areas for improving policy; provide agency officials with pragmatic and practicable examples of best practices; assist tribal governments in advocating for their priorities, and bring public awareness of states' performance in empowering or disempowering the sovereign Tribal Nations existing alongside them. The SRC will evaluate the existence and strength of state policies that recognize the sovereign status of Tribal Nations in environmental protection and conservation. These policies include co-management and collaboration on natural resource stewardship; consultation requirements and mechanisms for environmental decision-making and land use planning; lowered barriers to financing and funding programs; environmental justice initiatives applicable to Tribal Nations; the existence of state and agency tribal liaisons and advisory bodies; state recognition



of tribes; collaborative emergency management planning; environmental criteria and standards appropriate to tribal citizens' needs and lifeways (e.g., fish consumption rates in establishing water quality standards); carve-outs for Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge and sacred places in public records laws; and access to state parks and conservation areas to carry out traditional practices and exercise treaty-protected rights. The Institute will update the SRC every two to four years to motivate state policymakers and agency officials to make continuous improvements.

- **Co-Management and Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs)** - Substantial scholarship exists on the concepts of co-management and Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs). The Institute will survey existing models around the world and in the U.S., identifying practices transferable to the U.S. and other opportunities. IES will also examine the legal and policy barriers to adopting robust power-sharing arrangements covering research activities, allocation, regulation, and enforcement in the U.S. The Institute will address the primary issue of access to funding sufficient for Tribal Nations and tribal organizations to effectively participate in co-management arrangements and IPCA agreements.
- **Rights of Nature Podcast Series** - The multi-episode podcast series will focus on Tribal Nations that have adopted Rights of Nature provisions into tribal law and explain how recognition of these rights has driven indigenous-led conservation and environmental protection in policy, law, and action. The series will begin with an episode introducing the concept of the Rights of Nature as shaped by indigenous worldviews and strategies for protecting critical cultural and natural resources. The first set of episodes will feature interviews with tribal leaders, government staff, and community members who played key roles in their Tribal Nations recognizing the Rights of Nature. The second set will explore the recognition of the Rights of Nature around the world and how indigenous governments and peoples have driven and are leveraging these rights. Discussion will cover both obstacles and opportunities, as well as resources and guidance for tribal governments. Blog articles will accompany each episode, written by guest bloggers, such as interview guests and leaders in the space. IES will proactively identify cosponsors.
- **Treatment as a State (TAS)** - The Institute will investigate barriers to and opportunities for Tribal Nation primacy for major federal environmental statutory programs. This effort will encompass model tribal codes, workshops, and advocacy (e.g., expanding TAS provisions to more statutes).

Projects



- **Tribal Food Sovereignty Innovations Lab** - This digital hub will feature case studies, explanatory materials, and news accounts documenting innovative tribal food sovereignty approaches across Indian Country, organized and searchable by Tribal Nation, region, and type of approach (with a particular eye towards highlighting proven, scalable strategies for improving access to healthy foods). The Lab will also include searchable "how-to" resources geared towards informing and supporting the development of tribal food sovereignty innovations at the local level.

HERITAGE

- **Recognition and Safeguarding of Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge (ITEK)** - The Institute aims to analyze existing carve outs in open records laws and advocate for more robust protections. IES will also evaluate how different governments around the world and in the United States are integrating—or failing to integrate—ITEK into environmental decision-making. These efforts will inform the Institute’s efforts to develop a compendium and related programming on best practices, and also provide resources for Tribal Nations to safeguard their ITEK and establish enforceable conditions on researchers (e.g., model MOUs and contracts).
- **Cultural Keystones and Climate Change** - Climate change impacts Tribal Nations’ access to culturally important resources. This includes “cultural keystone” species of animals and plants, many of which are migrating away from reservations and ceded lands where tribal citizens retain treaty hunting/fishing/gathering/collecting rights. Simultaneously, new species are encroaching onto these lands, creating both challenges and opportunities. IES will evaluate different Tribal Nations’ approaches, including efforts to adapt, advocate for policy change, and collaborate at the regional level. The Institute will also identify needed resources and changes in state/federal law and analyze the implications for culture and for physical, mental, and emotional health and wellness.
- **Re-Indigenizing the Landscape** - IES will survey efforts underway across the U.S. and around the world to change geographic names. The Institute will identify case studies of Tribal Nation-led action from coast-to-coast to restore or reimagine the cultural landscape, from Denali to today, legislative initiatives at the federal and state levels, and examples of greater indigenous representation on State committees on geographic names. IES will contrast the evolving situation in the U.S. with other (generally former Commonwealth) countries like New Zealand, Australia, and Canada and evaluate the rethinking of international norms. The Institute will distill successful strategies and tactics and provide step-by-step guidance for Tribal Nations to reclaim the landscape from settler colonialism through a pragmatic approach using the tools and resources available.

INNOVATION

- **Critical technologies for natural resources conservation, environmental protection, and climate resilience** - A multi-phased effort to identify how Tribal Nations currently are and *could* leverage critical technologies to advance the conservation of natural resources, protection of ecosystems, and climate planning. This highlights Tribal Nations as leaders in recognizing the potential for integrating existing and innovative technologies for sustainability. The Phase 1 deliverable is a report titled “Critical Technologies for Tribal Environmental Management,” addressing use cases involving technologies such as CubeSats and Internet of Things (IoT) for environmental monitoring, Artificial Intelligence (AI) for data analysis and prediction, advanced robotics like drones and sensors for habitat restoration and species tracking, 3D printing for sustainable infrastructure, genetic engineering for species conservation and ecosystem remediation, and extended reality for environmental outreach. The report will incorporate case studies, identify which practices are replicable and customizable, evaluate obstacles to implementation, and highlight viable opportunities. Phase 2 will consist of educational programming and outreach activities, including webinars, podcasts, and workshops developed for Tribal Nations. Phase 3 will educate federal and state policymakers on opportunities for structuring regulatory and legal frameworks, as well as funding vehicles, to better enable Tribal Nations to take advantage of these critical technologies. Phase 4 will reach out to leaders in the commercial and industry sectors on opportunities for collaborating with Tribal Nations to design and pilot-test technologies, including tailoring product and service solutions to Tribal Nations’ needs. Phase 5 involves re-granting via the NCAI Foundation to selected Tribal Nations to pilot test critical technologies, prioritizing projects with long-term sustainability.
- **Reclaiming Our Energy - Tribal Sovereignty and the Just Transition** - Efforts to develop a net-zero economy often sacrifice Tribal Nations’ and indigenous communities’ well-being, human rights, critical natural resources, and culturally important landscapes. Examples of such activities include lithium extraction and cobalt mining for electric vehicle manufacturing, offshore and onshore wind turbines, and geoengineering experimentation. The Institute will undertake a multi-phased research, advocacy, and capacity-building project. Activities will include creating a model of Just Transition by and for Tribal Nations; building a digital compendium of case studies, interactive tools, and other educational materials; developing a set of policy

recommendations; and launching a series of educational workshops to ensure Tribal Nations and indigenous communities are central to the transition process. This approach prioritizes energy sovereignty, sustainable development, and economic independence, with a focus on leveraging Indigenous Knowledge and leadership in the shift to renewable energy. The project proposes a clear definition of Just Transition tailored to Tribal Nations, emphasizing sovereignty and ecological sustainability. It encompasses strategic partnerships, policymaker education at the federal and state levels, community empowerment through capacity development, and the promotion of sustainable economic development within indigenous communities.

- **Collaborating on Climate Change Adaptation/Mitigation with Local Governments**
The Institute will develop case studies, model ordinances and guidelines, and educational programming convening Tribal Nation and local government leaders (these items to be incorporated into the Climate Action Resource Center). Later phases envision developing guidance and models for state and federal government agencies to collaborate with Tribal Nations.
- **Climate Action Resource Center** - Rather than replicating efforts already underway at other organizations, the Center will serve as a one-stop-shop with the latest information about the impacts of climate change on Indian Country and on how Tribal Nations are taking innovative action to combat the negative consequences and attain greater resiliency overall. Phase One will gather existing resources and determine where gaps exist. Phase Two will collect, compile, and regularly update a compendium of Tribal Nations' climate plans. Phase Three will compile funding/financing resources or link to existing compilations. Phase Four will develop case studies, amplified through podcasts and blogs. Phase Five will develop model materials and guidance for Tribal Nations to build technical capacity. Phase Six (see "Collaborating on Climate Change Adaptation/Mitigation with Local Governments").



Programming



The Institute's role as an NCAI think tank extends beyond discrete projects to encompass ongoing programs. These programs aim to inform, assist, and advocate for Indian Country, educate policymakers and agency officials, and serve as a helpful resource for everyone interested in advancing conservation, environmental protection, and tribal sovereignty. IES carries out the activities below as part of its regular and ongoing responsibilities. Many of these items are already underway, while others will gradually be rolled out as the Institute's staffing and available resources grow.

- Monitor and analyze legislation, regulations, and policies.
- Produce and disseminate comments, letters of support, fact sheets, and guidance documents on new and developing federal policies.
- Develop articles for law and scientific journals that provide nuanced, in-depth perspectives.
- Conduct outreach and promote awareness through OpEds, blogs, podcasts, social media, and newsletters.
- Form partnerships and collaborate with intertribal organizations, nonprofits, and academic institutions.
- Build productive relationships with Tribal Nation elected and appointed leaders; tribal, federal, state, and local environmental and natural resource agencies, and congressional and executive officials.



Conferences



IES will conduct outreach and education in a variety of fora. This includes specific conferences identified as promising opportunities for advancing the Institute’s work, establishing valuable connections, and enhancing the professional development of the team. Below is a list of conferences that aligns with NCAI and the Institute’s goals. This list is not exhaustive and is subject to change.

- American Bar Association, Section of Environment, Energy, and Resources (ABA SEER) Spring and Fall Conferences
- Environmental Conference of the States (ECOS) Spring and Fall Conferences
- National Association of Tribal Historic Preservation Officers (NATHPO) Conference
- National Caucus of Environmental Legislators (NCEL) National Forum
- Natural Hazards Research and Applications Workshop
- National Tribal Climate Leaders Summit
- National Tribal & Indigenous Climate Conference (NTICC)

The Institute also proposes and coordinates selected programming for NCAI’s three major conferences: Executive Council Winter Session, Mid-Year, and the Annual Convention & Marketplace.

