

Amazon Center for Environmental Education and Research

Ethics Policy Guiding Work with Indigenous Communities

1. Purpose

The Amazon Center for Environmental Education and Research (ACEER) is committed to developing local and global conservation leaders through partnerships with Indigenous holders of traditional ecological knowledge. Together, we seek to conserve and restore biological and cultural diversity in the Amazon Basin and beyond. Accomplishing this mission requires that we engage in ethical relationships with the Indigenous peoples who have lived on and tended to their ancestral lands for generations.

The purpose of this policy is to:

- a) Establish the principles and values for ethical partnerships with Indigenous communities.
- b) Articulate a process for ethical decision-making.
- c) Provide tools other conservation practitioners can use to ensure their work with Indigenous communities is ethical; and
- d) Advance the field of conservation education by elevating *ethical* partnerships with Indigenous communities as an imperative.

2. Using the Policy

This ethics policy does not and cannot anticipate every situation an employee or associate of ACEER may find themselves confronting. As such, the principles and values contained herein address *general* circumstances and priorities that should be considered when making ethical decisions.

- 2.1. **Individual Decision-Making:** We expect our employees and associates to use good judgement and to act as respectful guests when visiting or working in Indigenous lands. As professionals, we understand that we must make carefully considered ethical choices in the course of our work. This policy can act as a guide, but employees and associates should also talk to each other and to appropriate leadership whenever there is doubt about ethical choices or conduct.

- 2.2. **Partnership and Project Decisions:** A process for organizational decision-making regarding new partnerships or projects with Indigenous communities is included in *Appendix 1* of this document.
- 2.3. **Ethical Reflection as Professional Development:** A process for reflecting about past experiences and developing a professional habit of ethical deliberation is included in *Appendix 2* of this document.

3. **Scope**

This policy applies to:

- 3.1. All ACEER board members, staff, conservation fellows, interns, and volunteers.
- 3.2. Individuals who are not directly affiliated with or employed by ACEER but who meet one or more of the following criteria:
 - 3.2.1. Contracted service providers, such as film crews and photographers.
 - 3.2.2. Academic researchers working in concert with ACEER's education programs.
 - 3.2.3. Guests of ACEER who visit Indigenous lands/communities, such as educators or school groups.

4. **Foundational Principles**

The following five principles describe the standards that drive ACEER's work.

- 4.1. **Passion:** We seek out and develop emerging leaders who share our enthusiasm for conservation of biological and cultural diversity.
 - 4.1.1. Development opportunities should expose emerging leaders to new ways of knowing and new methods of educating others about biological and cultural diversity, including the protection and empowerment of Indigenous rights and knowledge.
- 4.2. **Collaboration:** We engage with others to support the development of conservation leaders worldwide.
 - 4.2.1. Conservation and/or education projects conducted in Indigenous lands or with Indigenous communities should be of benefit to the Indigenous community and to ACEER's conservation educators/fellows/interns as appropriate.

- 4.3. **Transparency:** Information about projects, intentions, and finances are shared openly.
 - 4.3.1. Indigenous communities must be fully engaged in the nature and scope of any work conducted with ACEER on their lands or with their communities. This includes, but is not limited to: objectives, funding sources, data collection methods, and dissemination of any benefits.
 - 4.3.2. Information provided by ACEER must be presented in forms that are easily understood by the local community.
 - 4.3.3. Information about projects should be fully and openly discussed between all parties to ensure there is mutual understanding about goals and expectations.
 - 4.3.4. All project-related results must first be shared with the community before they are disseminated.
- 4.4. **Urgency:** An action-oriented mindset that seeks to conserve and regenerate ecosystems.
 - 4.4.1. Earth's biological and cultural diversity, as well as the sovereignty of Indigenous bearers of traditional ecological knowledge, are under constant threat from commercial interests. We conduct our work with a bias toward action that empowers Indigenous cultures and regenerates ecosystems.
- 4.5. **Longevity:** A commitment to long-term engagements with Indigenous communities.
 - 4.5.1. We recognize that mutual trust builds over time. We require an extended period of building rapport with Indigenous communities prior to conducting any work with them.
 - 4.5.2. Projects or research will not be initiated with Indigenous communities unless there is reasonable assurance that all stages of the project can be completed in a timely manner. This includes planning, funding, training, implementation, evaluation, and dissemination of results and benefits.

5. Ethical Values

Five values guide how we engage with each other and with Indigenous communities:

- 5.1. **Empowerment:** A commitment to building capacity for self-determination (not dependence). Individuals and communities are in charge of who they are and who they will become.

- 5.1.1. Indigenous communities are entitled to the benefits resulting from any projects conducted in their lands or with their community members. This includes retaining intellectual property rights to knowledge about their lands, ecosystems, artifacts, culture, images, beliefs, and stories.
- 5.1.2. At all stages of a project, the Indigenous community should be empowered to make decisions, participate, and secure benefits. This includes participating in the design of the project, being trained and paid to carry out the project goals, and benefiting from any physical and financial results.
- 5.2. **Respect:** The ability to treat others as dignified beings deserving of equal moral concern as oneself. This value also requires seeing oneself and one's community as independent sources of moral worth and dignity.
 - 5.2.1. Whenever possible, we will acknowledge the Indigenous community on whose ancestral lands we are living and working.
 - 5.2.2. Educational materials or workshops that include Indigenous knowledge will support the cultural integrity of the community and be developed bilingually in collaboration with the community for their mutual use.
 - 5.2.3. Engagements with Indigenous communities will only take place after securing permission from the community in the form of prior informed consent.
 - 5.2.3.1. Informed consent may take different forms in different contexts. ACEER will work with the person(s) or representative authorities within the Indigenous community to develop a mechanism for full disclosure and consent.
 - 5.2.3.2. At minimum, consent for new projects should be secured in writing. The agreement should ensure mutual understanding about the project, including potential benefits and burdens to the community, to ACEER, and any other party involved. It should also address when verbal consent may suffice (e.g., for photographs) and how community members may withdraw consent.
- 5.3. **Cultural Humility:** The ability to maintain an "other-oriented" perspective and recognize that there is more than one way of knowing and being.

- 5.3.1. We engage in good faith with Indigenous communities, seeking first to understand their cultural norms and ways of knowing in recognition that the norms underlying our experiences and beliefs are different.
- 5.3.2. We seek to incorporate traditional ecological knowledge with our own sources of knowledge, whether academic, experiential, or occupational.
- 5.4. **Non-Maleficence:** Do no harm.
 - 5.4.1. We will not engage in any work that threatens the dignity or sovereignty of an Indigenous community.
 - 5.4.2. We will not engage in any work that may result in future harms to Indigenous communities, their lands, or their culture.
 - 5.4.3. We will identify and give thoughtful consideration to any potential unintended consequences and long-term impacts of our work on individuals, communities, identities, heritage, and the environment.
- 5.5. **Self-Reflection:** Openness to individual and collective discussions about experiences. This includes the ability to reflect on and address injustices of the past.
 - 5.5.1. We recognize that as we work with Indigenous communities we do so as part of a colonizing culture that has systematically slaughtered Indigenous peoples through disease and war, stolen their land, and stripped them of their ability to sustain or pass on their culture. It is incumbent upon us to reflect on this shared past and approach our work from a place of awareness and humility.
 - 5.5.1.1. Training and orientation materials should include a brief history of the Indigenous community, including information about cultural or social norms that may aid in understanding of the needs and expectations of the community.
 - 5.5.2. As we conduct our work, it is inevitable that we will experience challenging or thought-provoking situations. We commit to creating space for personal and collective reflection about these experiences and what they mean for our ongoing work.

6. **Ethics Complaints**

- 6.1. Violations of this policy must be brought to the attention of the appropriate body for resolution.
 - 6.1.1. Harms to the ecosystem or to an Indigenous community must be brought to the attention of the offender(s) and a process initiated for resolution.
 - 6.1.2. Harms to individuals in the form of harassment, discrimination, or other affronts to human dignity shall be brought to the attention of an independent ACEER leader for resolution and remediation.
- 6.2. We will pursue disciplinary action against any individual who retaliates against a person for raising an ethical concern.
- 6.3. We will gather all available facts before rendering judgment about ethical misconduct, and we will pursue disciplinary action against anyone who knowingly makes a false claim.

Appendix 1: Ethical Decision-Making for New Projects or Partnerships with Indigenous Communities

The process described here is a guide for the evaluation of new projects or partnerships with Indigenous communities. The first section describes the four steps that a deliberative body should take when evaluating the project. *Table 1* is a framework for the deliberative body to use in its evaluation. The framework follows the five principles described in Section 4 of this document, and where appropriate the values enumerated in Section 5 are also noted.

Process for Deliberation

1. **Describe** the project or partnership, including the goals, methods, populations, and expected results.
2. **Evaluate** the project using the five principles in *Table 1*, including any supplemental criteria that may be needed.
3. **Recommend** revisions or modifications to the planned project or partnership. If appropriate, reject or approve.
4. **Monitor** the impacts of the project over time to determine whether the goals were met and whether unforeseen ethical consequences/questions arise.

Table 1: Principles for Ethical Engagements with Indigenous Communities

Passion/Mission Alignment
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Does the project develop local and global conservation leaders? How?• Does the project support conservation education and/or the regeneration of ecosystems? How?
Collaboration
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Is the project something the community wants? Explain. <i>[Respect]</i>• What/who is the representative authority within the community that ACEER will work with? How will prior informed consent be obtained? <i>[Respect]</i>• What are the range of expected benefits to the members of the community and to ACEER? <i>[Respect]</i> How long will the benefits last? How will the benefits be disseminated?• Are there any burdens or risks associated with the project? What potential harms could come to the community or the ecosystem? <i>[Non-Maleficence]</i> How long will the burdens/risks last? Can the burdens/risks be mitigated? If so, how?• How will ACEER staff be informed about cultural or social norms that may help them understand the needs and expectations of the community? <i>[Respect]</i>
Transparency
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is the process for engaging the community in designing, participating in, and potentially leading the project? <i>[Empowerment]</i>• How will the community be kept apprised about progress, including financial gains/losses?• How will ACEER ensure that information about the project is mutually understood by both ACEER and the Indigenous community? (Google Translate is not enough).
Longevity

- Has ACEER built mutual trust with the community prior to introducing this project? *[Humility]*
- Can ACEER complete all stages of the project in a timely manner? This includes planning, funding, training, implementation, evaluation, and dissemination of the results and benefits. *[Respect]*
- How will the project build capacity for self-determination? *[Empowerment]*

Urgency

- Does the project meet an immediate and/or long-term need identified by the community?
- How will the project protect traditional ecological knowledge from commercial interests that might exploit that knowledge?
- What mechanisms will be in place to ensure that the Indigenous community will retain intellectual property rights to knowledge about their lands, ecosystems, artifacts, culture, images, and stories? *[Empowerment]*

Appendix 2: Ethical Reflection as Professional Development

Learning to be ethical is an organic part of growing up in a human community. We are taught right from wrong in childhood and we hone our ethical instincts well into adulthood. Yet, many professionals face ethical dilemmas in their day-to-day work. These dilemmas often go unexpressed and unresolved. Bringing together small groups to safely discuss the dilemmas they face can help alleviate stress and foster an ethical culture.

The approach to discussing ethical dilemmas outlined here is adapted from Molewijk et al. (2008). It is a collaborative, systematic discussion of a real situation faced by one or more people in a deliberation group. An ethical dilemma is a situation in which a person is faced with two or more equally “right” options and they can only choose one (Kidder, 2005). The team-based conversation takes 60-90 minutes depending on the complexity of the case. Not all cases brought to a session will have a clear answer. Nonetheless, there is benefit in practicing ethical reasoning and giving staff a structured way to reflect on their experiences. An independent facilitator should always be present to guide the conversation. The facilitator concentrates on the quality of the deliberation process rather than trying to get to a solution.

How it works:

The basic outline of a session is as follows:

1. Present the facts of the case.
2. Brief explanation of the dilemma (i.e., Should I do A or B?).
 - a. Facilitator helps ensure the explanation is as concrete as possible and focuses on the circumstances of the person(s) facing the dilemma, not the circumstances of people in general.
3. Group asks questions and seeks clarifications, as needed.
4. Identify perspectives, values, and norms.
 - a. List each person, group, or community involved or impacted by the case.
 - b. List the values that inform their perspectives.
 - c. What behavior is expected from each person, group, or community based on their cultural or hierarchical status?

5. List all possible alternatives without regard to feasibility.
6. Each member of the group expresses their perspective:
 - a. I think the right thing to do is...
 - b. Because...
 - c. Therefore, I'm not able to do...
 - d. Here are some ways I can I cope with or decrease the moral burden of my decision...
7. Discuss possible consensus or decision.
8. Make practical follow-up action items and plan a date to evaluate them.

References

- Kidder, R.M. (2005). *How good people make tough choices: Resolving the dilemmas of ethical living*. Harper Publishing.
- Molewijk, A.C., Abma, T., Stolper, M, and Widdershoven, G. (2008). Teaching ethics in the clinic. The theory and practice of moral case deliberation. *Journal of Medical Ethics* (34), pp. 120-124.