

AFCEC strives for respectful engagement with American Indian and Alaska Native Tribes

By Jennifer Schneider

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There are currently 574 federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native Tribes and villages, each with its own unique culture and traditions. Air Force installations are built on land originally belonging to these diverse tribes, many of which still hold strong historic, cultural and traditional ties to their ancestral homes.

Supporting effective, robust and respectful Air Force engagement with tribes, and respecting their ancestral ties and sovereignty, is a critical goal for the Air Force Civil Engineer Center.

“It is inherent in our trust responsibility as representatives of the federal government that we must respect Native Americans and tribal governments and ensure they have a voice in decisions that affect places that hold religious, traditional and/or cultural importance,” said Alison Rubio, Air Force cultural resources subject matter expert. “At AFCEC, we provide the training, information, tools and guidance to help Air Force installations build and sustain strong relationships with associated tribes.”

Jacqueline Melcher, installation management flight chief and installation tribal liaison officer for Joint Base Charleston, South Carolina, is an enrolled member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe and was born and raised on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation of South Dakota. Growing up on a reservation, she especially understands the importance of mutual respect and communication.

“I have a lot of compassion and am an advocate for tribal members due to my indigenous background,” Melcher said. “It’s critical that we seek to understand the cultural differences between tribes and give each the respect they deserve. Without that respect, we can’t have effective collaboration.”

Many typical military activities, such as training and construction, have the potential to desecrate land that holds religious and cultural significance to tribal members. Federal laws require the military to conserve and protect these cultural resources, Melcher said.

“They (Native Americans) have information about the land that we aren’t privy to, and that knowledge is critical to the Air Force,” she said. “They want to respect their deceased relatives and ancestors. If we have already established relationships with the tribes and uncover an artifact, we owe it to them to give them a say in what happens to it – they were here first. Having strong, established relationships in advance of an event is important. Military processes can be delayed if that relationship doesn’t already exist.”

In addition to her role as ITLO, Mechler was appointed by Brig. Gen. Terrence Adams as lead for the Department of the Air Force Barrier Analysis Group for the Indigenous Nations Equality Team. INET's goal is to review and analyze guidelines, programs, data and other information for barriers to employment, advancement and retention of American Indian/Native American and Alaska Native employees, applicants and military members.

One of the biggest challenges Melcher faces is the geographical distance to the tribes. Of the 13 tribes associated with JB Charleston, over half are now located in Oklahoma and Florida. As a result, it can be harder to make those connections, she said.

"Indigenous people were relocated, so there may be some mistrust of the government," Melcher said. "It's important to have compassion and educate yourself. My team and I are wholeheartedly invested in this role."

Tony Lucas, environmental element chief and ITLO at Malmstrom Air Force Base, Montana, faces similar challenges.

"Our eight tribal governments, which represent about 14 tribes, are all in different directions," Lucas said. "It's not like we can just meet up and have coffee. It's a significant investment in time to visit them, but it's well-invested time. Instead of always asking them to visit us, it's been a good experience to take time to visit them, to see where they live and better understand their beliefs and culture."

Melcher became an ITLO less than a year ago. To help her be successful, AFCEC provided a report of the installation's affiliated tribes and points of contact. She also attended an AFCEC tribal relations training class a few months ago.

"I attended the course and thought it was fantastic," she said. "One of the presenters, Chris Howell (Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma), graciously agreed to host a brief cultural training for members of the 349th Recruiting Squadron and the commander of the Air Force Expeditionary Center in July, in preparation for the 71st annual Indian Hills Pow Wow in Oklahoma."

In addition to building strong tribal relations, leadership training is another important ITLO responsibility.

"Relationships take time. Leadership changes every two years or so, so it's a constant training process to help leaders understand and appreciate these relationships. Often when they come on board, it's their first exposure to tribal relations," Lucas said.

Lucas has been involved in Malmstrom's tribal relations program for over 15 years and sees value in the training he has taken as well.

"Before I took training and was a new civilian in 2006, I had a mindset that we are (Department of Defense) and no one should question us," Lucas said. "The concept of

sovereign nations was not something I initially comprehended. Now, after taking training and reading several books on culture and religion, I better understand. It takes a while to get your mind wrapped around it and to understand the program's significance. This is not going to a staff meeting – it's government-to-government diplomacy on a whole new level."

In addition to providing training and other guidance, AFCEC recently launched a geographic information systems-powered tribal relations viewer for installation use, available at <https://maps.af.mil/geoportal/apps/sites/#/environmental/pages/cr-tribal-relations>. Access is available to users with common access cards and Air Force network accounts.

"This tool provides a more robust picture of the relationship between tribal lands and DOD installations than we've ever had before," Rubio said. "It also provides a tribal contact list to make it easier for ITLOs and cultural resource managers to connect with tribal leaders and help with decision-making. Air Force installations are currently consulting with 328 tribes and Native Hawaiian Organizations, and we foresee that number growing as installation personnel make use of the viewer."

During Native American Heritage Month in November, Rubio encourages installations to learn and help others gain a better understanding of Native American culture, points of view and heritage.

"It's important that we build a relationship with tribes that is focused on collaboration and mutual respect and understanding," Rubio said. "Being willing to ask questions and learn about their history and culture goes a long way in building trust."