



Ancestral Wisdom Guides Today's Paths:

*Indigenous Conservation
and Rights of Nature*



September 18, 2025 | Virginia Crossings Hotel & Conference Center

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Indigenous Conservation and Rights of Nature



September 18, 2025 | Virginia Crossings Hotel & Conference Center

Conference Agenda

8:00 AM

REGISTRATION

Henrico Ballroom

Snacks and beverages available in Henrico Ballroom Lobby

9:00 AM

OPENING CEREMONY

Welcome

- ▶ Melissa Ann Ehrenreich, Emcee

Executive Director, Indigenous Conservation Council

Drum Song

- ▶ Maskapow Drum Group

Rappahannock Tribe

Procession of Flag Bearers and Tribes

Prayer

9:15 AM

OPENING REMARKS

Chief Anne Richardson will introduce the Chiefs and the special guests. She will share why the Rappahannock Tribe chose to include the rights of nature in their constitution and how they believe it will help Tribes protect their sacred lands.

9:30 AM

MĀORI CULTURAL EXCHANGE CEREMONY

Remarks by Māori leader, Danielle Harris, followed by a song and gift to Virginia.

9:45 AM

RECOGNIZING THE RIGHTS OF NATURE

Thomas Linzey will talk about how tribal governments across the U.S. have begun to adopt laws recognizing the rights of ecosystems and nature and how those laws can be used to expand and strengthen tribal sovereignty.

Frank Bibeau will share his experience working with tribes as they enforce rights of nature codes to help protect natural resources for future generations.

**We strive
to strengthen
partnerships
with Tribal Nations
and Indigenous
communities.**



The
Wilderness
Society

The Wilderness Society (TWS) is grateful to the Virginia Sovereign Nations for their leadership in conservation and for their stewardship of the lands, waters, and wildlife of the region since time immemorial. To meet the environmental challenges of the 21st century, Tribal Ancestral knowledge and leadership must be centered. TWS supports Tribal Nations in eliminating barriers of access to conservation funding programs including the Land and Water Conservation Fund and respects the sovereignty of Tribes to advance Tribal priorities such as the Rights of Nature.

The future of the conservation movement must be diversity-focused, inclusivity-centered, and grounded in Tribal sovereignty and self-determination.



**Scan to learn more about TWS's
Native Lands Partnerships.**



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11:00 AM

TRIBAL CLIMATE CHANGE REPORT

Nikki Cooley will share the results of the Institute for Tribal Environmental Professionals' Tribal Climate Change Report.

12:00 PM

LUNCHEON

Dining Room Buffet

1:15 PM

SPECIAL PRESENTATION

Chief Anne Richardson will present a special award to the Weissberg Foundation, which has supported the seven federally recognized tribes and the Indigenous Council for the Chesapeake Bay.

1:30 PM

NEW ZEALAND PRESENTATION

Kitcki Carroll, USET, will share his work with the New Zealand Tribes. Mr. Carroll will introduce Helmut Modlik, CEO of the Ngati Toa Tribe based Wellington, NZ. Mr. Modlik will share insights on their work in sovereignty and self-determination.

1:45 PM

TRIBAL CONSERVATION EASEMENTS

Mary Adelzadeh will share her expertise on easements that incorporate Indigenous Knowledge into land management practices.

2:30 PM

INDIGENOUS GUARDIANS NETWORK

Shawn Watts will introduce the work of the Indigenous Guardians Network and how it could help protect Virginia's Natural Resources

3:15 PM

CHESAPEAKE BAY HOPE SPOT

A team of panelists will share their efforts to establish the Chesapeake Bay Hope Spot Initiative and what it means for the Chesapeake Bay.

Facilitator: Melissa Ann Ehrenreich

Panelists: Dr. Ellen Pikitch
Dr. Stephen Tomasetti
Dr. Kelsey Leonard
Dr. Kayle Krieg
Chief Anne Richardson

4:30 PM

CLOSING REMARKS

CONFERENCE ADJOURNS

Sovereign Nations of Virginia



**Chief
Joanne Howard**

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**Chief
Stephen Adkins**

CHICKAHOMINYTRIBE.ORG



**Chief
Diane Shields**

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**Chief
Keith Anderson**

NANSEMOND.ORG



**Chief
Kevin Brown**

PAMUNKEY.ORG



**Chief
Anne Richardson**

RAPPAHANNOCKTRIBE.ORG



**Chief
Frank Adams**

UMITRIBE.ORG

Conference Speakers



Thomas Linzey serves as Senior Legal Counsel for the Center for Democratic and Environmental Rights (CDER), an organization committed to globally advancing the legal rights of nature and environmental rights. He is the co-founder of the Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund (CELDF) and is widely recognized as the founder of the contemporary “community rights” and “rights of nature” movements, which have resulted in the adoption of several hundred laws across the United States and around the world. He sits on the Board of Advisors of the New Earth Foundation. Linzey is a cum laude graduate of Widener Law School. He serves as a faculty member for the National Academy of Continuing Legal Education (NACLE) and for Lawline, both national providers of continuing legal education courses for lawyers. The Center for Democratic and Environmental Rights can be found at centerforenvironmentalrights.org.



Frank Bibeau serves as Tribal Attorney & Director of CDER’s Tribal Rights of Nature Program. He is an enrolled citizen of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe and has spent most of his life on Leech Lake Reservation in Ball Club, Minnesota. Frank is a Tribal Attorney working extensively with Chippewa treaty rights, civil rights and sovereignty, on and off reservation. He serves as Executive Director for the 1855 Treaty Authority, has developed several legal defense strategies based on the Rights of Manoomin and represented Manoomin (wild rice) and the White Earth Band of Ojibwe in *Manoomin v DNR* in White Earth Tribal Court and *DNR v White Earth Band of Ojibwe* and *Chief Judge DeGroat* in Minnesota District Court and the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals (2021-2022). Frank’s legal work focuses on the Treaty rights of tribes and members to help protect the natural resources for future generations.



Mary Adelzadeh is a member of the Navajo Nation and a Senior Program Officer at First Nations Development Institute. She is responsible for stewardship initiatives by providing technical assistance and supporting the development of conservation strategies to protect traditional values and recover control of and access to ancestral land and natural resources. She has extensive conservation experience working with Tribal, federal, and state governments, as well as non-governmental organizations. Mary earned a Master of Science degree in resource policy and behavior, with a concentration in conservation biology from the University of Michigan. For her commitment to promoting conservation in the nonprofit and government sectors, Mary was selected as a Doris Duke Conservation Program Fellow. Mary also holds a Bachelor of Science degree in environmental biology and management from the University of California, Davis.



Helmut Modlik, CEO of the Ngati Toa Tribe based Wellington, Aotearoa (New Zealand) specializes in change and growth of the Tribe. He is an experienced director, executive, and consultant with skills in implementation and change management, business and economic development, strategic analysis and planning, public policy, and finance. Helmut has extensive consulting experience in a wide range of private and public sectors (particularly health) including appointment to the boards of PHARMAC, Capital & Coast District Health Board, Health Information Standards Organization, and Health Information Strategy Action Committee. He holds BCA and MBA degrees, which led him initially into accounting and finance, and then enabled him to transition into economic development (as the inaugural CEO of Poutama Trust) and management consulting. Helmut is fiercely passionate about working to enhance the well-being, prosperity, and mana of Ngāti Toa. As Tumu Whakarae, Helmut provides visionary leadership, balancing cultural values with innovation to ensure sustainable growth and prosperity for Ngāti Toa and its people.



Shawn Watts has dedicated his entire legal career to Indian law, mediation, and negotiation. He is the Director of the U.S. Indigenous Guardians Network for the Indigenous Leadership Initiative. He also serves as Director of the Tribal Law & Government Center, Tribal Judicial Support Clinic, and Mediation Clinic at the University of Kansas School of Law. He teaches Mediation and Negotiation for Law Practice at Columbia Law School where he previously served as the Associate Director of the Mediation Program. As a law professor, Shawn specializes in helping tribal courts to integrate traditional and customary tribal justice practices. In addition to his work with Indian tribes and tribal organizations, Shawn is also a lead trainer and formal partner with the United Nations Institute of Training and Research where he trains and advises world diplomats on the issues facing the world's Indigenous Peoples. A citizen of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, Shawn is a Justice on the Supreme Court of the Nottawaseppi Huron Band of the Potawatomi and has also served as a district court judge for the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation.



Nikki Cooley is the co-manager for Institute of Tribal Environmental Professionals' Tribal Climate Change Program. She is of the Diné Nation by way of Shonto and Blue Gap, AZ. Nikki received her Bachelors and Master of Forestry from Northern Arizona University (NAU) with a few years of post-graduate study at Michigan State University. She has worked extensively with the Cherokee Tribe of North Carolina and has worked with various tribes including the Kaibab Paiute tribe. Nikki is the co-founder of the Native American River Guide Training Program and Fifth World Discoveries, was the first Native American President and Vice-President of the Grand Canyon River Guides Association (GCRG) and is a former associate director of the Native Voices Program. She is very passionate about advocating for and education about the protection and preservation of the environment and its resources.



Melissa Ann Ehrenreich serves as the Executive Director of the Indigenous Conservation Council of the Chesapeake Bay. She has three decades of experience in marine and terrestrial conservation at all levels working on strategy and policy development, philanthropic partnerships, capacity building, and community economic development that she is now sharing with Tribal Nations to build capacity to rematriate and care for ancestral lands and waters. She lives with her husband and three children in the Anacostia watershed and on the traditional hunting grounds of the Piscataway-Conoy. Her family dates back to the 1620s as colonizers of stolen Indigenous lands in what is now known as Virginia.



Dr. Kelsey Leonard is a water scientist, legal scholar, policy expert, writer, and enrolled citizen of the Shinnecock Nation. Her work focuses on Indigenous water justice and its climatic, territorial, and governance underpinnings for our shared sustainable future. Dr. Leonard represents the Shinnecock Nation on the Mid-Atlantic Committee on the Ocean, which is charged with protecting America's ocean ecosystems and coastlines. She also serves as a member of the Great Lakes Water Quality Board of the International Joint Commission. Dr. Leonard has been instrumental in safeguarding the interests of Indigenous Nations for environmental planning and builds Indigenous science and knowledge into new solutions for sustainable water and ocean governance.



Dr. Stephen Tomasetti joined the University of Maryland Eastern Shore and the NOAA Living Marine Resources Cooperative Science Center as an Assistant Professor of Coastal Environmental Science. His research addresses the challenges posed by the climate crisis, eutrophication, and historic overfishing to the health of the coastal ocean. Tomasetti is interested in advancing climate-adaptive pathways toward the resilience or recovery of coastal shellfish and the ecosystems they support; he focuses on actions that will increase resilience, such as restoring sea grass meadows and oyster reefs, rebuilding depleted shellfish populations, and generating sustainable coastal food systems. He received his Ph.D. in Marine and Atmospheric Sciences at Stony Brook University researching the effects of coastal change on blue crabs, bay scallops, sea scallops, and oysters. Dr. Tomasetti earned an MA in Biology from Hunter College, and a BS in Biology from the University of Central Florida.



Dr. Ellen Pikitch is the founder and inaugural Endowed Professor of Ocean Conservation Science at Stony Brook University, in the School of Marine and Atmospheric Sciences. She is an award-winning scientist, conservationist, and communicator, who is transforming the way the ocean is perceived and managed. Ellen's contributions range from the local to the global levels and have resulted in basic science innovations, fisheries management, and domestic and international policy change. Currently, her areas of focus include marine protected areas and the use of eDNA technology, for non-invasive assessment of fish and invertebrate communities. She is the scientific lead for the Ocean Sanctuary Alliance, a coalition of Member States that seeks to accelerate the creation of science-based MPAs. She is a native New Yorker who has traveled to more than 110 countries, has authored more than 200 scientific and popular articles, and edited two books.



Dr. Kayle Krieg is the State Science and Policy Fellow working with the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science to support the Science and Technical Working Group of the Maryland Commission on Climate Change. She is also a PhD candidate in the Marine, Estuarine, Environmental Science Program, finishing her dissertation at the University of Maryland Eastern Shore. Her doctoral work focuses on benthic macroinvertebrate species and functional diversity, and the relationship between these communities and juvenile fish assemblages in the Maryland Coastal Bays. She earned her master's degree at the University of Arizona where her research focused on adult and larval fish behavior after exposure to water from an effluent dependent stream near Tucson, Arizona. She is currently involved in the steering committee of the Society for Women in Marine Science where she serves as the Chapter Liaison. Kayle is devoted to science communication and outreach and has attended several science communication trainings, including with the Alan Alda Center for Communicating Science.



Kitcki Carroll, Executive Director, United South and Eastern Tribes and the Sovereignty Protection Fund, will introduce the Aotearoa/New Zealand Tribal Leaders and outline the work they are doing with USET and US Tribes. United South and Eastern Tribes, Inc. (USET) and the USET Sovereignty Protection Fund (USET SPF) are inter-tribal organizations advocating on behalf of 33 federally recognized Tribal Nations from the Northeastern Woodlands to the Everglades and across the Gulf of Mexico. In his capacity as Executive Director, Kitcki works to protect, promote, and advance the inherent sovereign rights and authorities of the organization's member Tribal Nations and Indian Country overall. Mr. Carroll is a strong justice advocate for all Native American people and actively works to ensure that the United States fulfills its trust and treaty responsibilities and obligations to Indian Country. Mr. Carroll is a citizen of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes. He has held various Executive/Senior management positions in the tribal government and not-for-profit sector over the past 20 years, and he has served on various workgroups, panels, task forces, boards, and advisory groups.

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Māori Delegation

The Māori Delegation from Aotearoa (New Zealand) will share a cultural exchange at the beginning of the conference. The delegation is travelling to the US to learn more about how Native American Tribes are fulfilling their economic, social, cultural and political aspirations within the USA's political-legal framework. Tribes in New Zealand signed the Treaty of Waitangi with the British Crown in 1840 and have been on a 185-year journey of advocating for the New Zealand Government to fulfill its Treaty promises to Māori. There is much yet to do - and delegates are wanting to learn from their indigenous brothers and sisters about the strategies, initiatives and approaches used by Native American Tribes to ensure Treaty and Constitutional obligations are fulfilled in the US.

In addition to Helmut Modlik, the delegation includes:



Danielle Harris O.N.Z.M, LLB, Post Grad Dip Bus & Admin is the Chief Executive Officer of Tanenuiarangi Manawatū Incorporated, a representative body for Rangitāne o Manawatū Rōpu. This includes Best Care (Whakapai Hauora) Charitable Trust, our Whānau Ora, Health and Wellbeing arm, Te Ao Turoa Environmental Centre, our Environmental arm, Kia Ora FM 89.8 our Communications arm and Te Hotu Manawa o Rangitāne o Manawatū, our Cultural arm. Danielle, through her legal background, has worked in both the private and public sectors and returned home to work with her mother's people Rangitāne, a few decades ago. Danielle has a long list of governance experience on behalf of her people, in the areas of health, education and the environment. Tribal affiliations: Rangitāne, Ngapuhi, Ngāti Maniapoto, Ngāti Ruanui, Muaupoko and Ngāti Apa.



Wayne Blissett is the Executive Director Tuia te Oranga with the Iwi Rangitāne o Manawatū in Palmerston North, New Zealand, an experienced Senior Consultant skilled in Bi-cultural facilitation and currently is a Community Member on Te Kaunihera (National Indigenous Committee) with RANZCP (Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatry). Prior to joining Rangitāne o Manawatū Wayne was the Operations Executive for Pae Ora – Māori Health Directorate at MDHB (Palmerston North Hospital) for almost six years. Wayne has consulted on national and regional bicultural and kaupapa Māori (Māori designed, delivered and governed) programmes and indigenous service design since 1999 specializing in unbundling Crown resources to Iwi and Māori providers, Wayne draws on indigenous systems analysis to support the transfer of resources to support indigenous design and delivery of whānau ora (Māori philosophy, model of care and movement for whole of whānau wellbeing) across multiple areas. Wayne is a kairaranga (weaver) and has commissioned pieces around the world including London, Dubai and Tanzania. Tribal affiliations: Nga Puhi – Far North of the North Island of New Zealand.



Aleisha “Charli” Tibble is the Kaiarahi Matua for Tanenuiarangi Manawatū Incorporated. In particular she works with our Environmental Team helping manage logistics for various projects on our Settlement properties and contracted work the team undertake. From time-to-time, Charli also supports programs across our hauora where they include fishing and diving and in particular skippers the boat for such projects. Charli also skippers the boat for when we undertake any monitoring along our coastline. Charli undertakes a number of supporting roles in our corporate arm when we establish new services, fleet management, security and other logistics. Tribal affiliations: Ngati Porou.



Mara Andrews, Tour Coordinator, grew up and was educated in Napier on the east coast of Aotearoa (New Zealand), and later studied at Massey University to earn management qualifications, followed by completion of an MBA from Henley, UK. She has recently completed a PhD and her research Thesis is about the success of Tribal Self-Governance of USA Native American and Alaska Native Tribes. She has worked for the Māori Land Court, the Māori Trustee, the former Department of Māori Affairs and later Te Puni Kokiri. She has been in the health sector since in 1991 and worked in Māori Health for the former Central RHA and Health Funding Authority before starting her own consultancy Kāhui Tautoko Consulting Ltd (KTCL) in 2000. KTCL has continued in business for the past 25 years working with indigenous First Nations communities) and another subsidiary in Honolulu Hawai’i to work with Native Hawaiian communities. Tribal Affiliations: Ngāti Kahungunu, Ngati Raukawa, Te Whakatōhea.



“WILDERNESS IS A COLONIAL, WESTERN EUROPEAN IDEAL.

What people call “wild,” we (Indigenous people) have called “home” for thousands of years. And there is literally no word that I can find when I talk with Indigenous tribes around the states that has an equivalent of the word “wild”....”

QUOTE FROM —

Charles F. Sams III
19th National Park Service Director, Cayuse and Walla Walla, and an enrolled member of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation 20

Thank you Weissberg Foundation

2025 Outstanding funder of the year.

Thank you for supporting the Virginia Tribes.

The Sovereign Nations of Virginia are pleased to present this award to the Weissberg Foundation for their extraordinary generosity to the tribes during an especially difficult time. Federal cutbacks, along with the curtailment of previously awarded federal grants, have caused significant challenges for the Tribes, which have been working since 2016 & 2018 to stand up their governments and build infrastructure to provide critical services to their citizens and their communities. Weissberg Foundation's gifts made it possible for some of these critical services to continue.

Brief History of Weissberg's Relationship with the Tribes

In April 2022, the Indigenous Council for the Chesapeake Bay (ICC) presented to the Chesapeake Bay Funders Network to highlight tribal leadership and the work of Tribal Nations, the importance of Indigenous Cultural Landscapes and the emerging Indigenous Conservation Council.

In November 2023, Weissberg Foundation provided seed capacity support to the ICC to develop a website and support capacity to identify tribal priorities of interest for the ICC.

November 2023, Chief Anne Richardson (Rappahannock Tribe), Kitcki Carroll (United South & Eastern Tribes), and Leah Salgado (Weissberg Foundation) presented to the Chesapeake Bay Funders Network, comprised of more than 100 funders focused on the Chesapeake Bay watershed. It highlighted ways funders can learn, support, and support sovereignty. It also highlighted the unique relationship to all of nature through not ownership, not stewardship but kinship with nature that supports Indigenous-led initiatives and the practice and development of Indigenous Knowledge.



In February 2024, the Foundation made a five-year commitment to the ICC and each of our Tribal Nation members with full support of sovereignty and self-determination.

Chief Keith Anderson (Nansemond Indian Nation) was added to the Foundation's Board in February 2025, representing their depth of leadership in ensuring that leaders in the community are represented at all levels, including decision-making levels.

In March 2025, while some foundations pivoted, changed strategy, or re-evaluated their funding commitments, Weissberg decided to stand with all its grantee partners and our communities to meet the moment. Its Board authorized the Foundation to release up to an additional \$10 million in surge funding in 2025 alone—doubling their planned annual grant spend to \$19.6 million dollars. The portion of funding for tribes flowed in the form of valuable unrestricted funding.

Examples of What the Tribes Accomplished with Weissberg Support:

Chief Stephen Adkins (Chickahominy Indian Tribe) was able to provide financial assistance to the Virginia Tribal Education Consortium (VTEC) to help cover a funding shortfall when an approved grant was not funded in January 2025. VTEC provides educational assistance to American Indian students within the Commonwealth of Virginia. The Weissberg funding also helped provide training and emergency preparedness, as well as mental health content for staff, home health care visits to elderly citizens

of the Tribe and helped to fund gaps for vital positions within administration.

Chief Diane Shields (Monacan Indian Nation) thanks the Weissberg Foundation for funds that supported individuals working with Indian Child Welfare Act cases and enabled the purchase of equipment and fertilizer for the fields at Laurel Cliff Farm, which is instrumental in economic development.

Chief Keith F. Anderson (Nansemond Indian Nation) shares, “Besides having the tremendous honor of being selected as a board member, I also have direct involvement in serving underserved and indigenous communities throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia. The Weissberg Foundation’s staff and board members are genuine, strategic, and unwavering in their advocacy. The Nansemond Indian Nation has utilized funding to develop and enhance our environmental programs throughout Hampton Roads, Virginia. Due to federal budget cuts, continuing these

initiatives would not have been possible without assistance from the foundation. To say the least, all our tribes are extremely fortunate to have such an integral and devout partner. The Weissberg Foundation is simply incredible.”

Chief Anne Richardson (Rappahannock Tribe) noted that the unrestricted surge funding helped to close the gap between what the Tribe had raised and what was needed to acquire 969 acres of its ancestral homelands at Fones Cliffs. Weissberg also provided a critical bridge loan needed to close the sale (some grant funds are only released after sale closing). The foundation’s annual funding has provided human resources and operations staff support that allows the tribe to continue critical services to its citizens.

Chief W. Frank Adams (Upper Mattaponi Indian Tribe) said, “The monetary donations from the Weissberg Foundation have assisted the Upper Mattaponi Tribe in continuing our youth and elder programs. It is with humble thanks for these generous gifts.”

“Weissberg Foundation believes that resourcing Indigenous land stewardship and self-determination by Native peoples is vital to our collective future, and an important step in remedying our past. Our work seeks to uphold three central values: Sovereignty, Repair, and Supporting Future Generations. Our support of Virginia’s seven federally recognized tribes, and the Indigenous Conservation Council of the Chesapeake Bay, represents our commitment to the inherent right of Indigenous people to steward the land and our trust in Native people.”

Too few philanthropic dollars for land conservation and climate justice go to Native led and accountable organizations. And even fewer of those dollars go directly to tribes. If we support environmental conservation and climate justice, we must fund Indigenous land stewardship and directly fund tribes and tribal organizations to do this work. Weissberg Foundation is proud to support Virginia’s federally recognized tribes and the Indigenous Conservation Council.”



— Ricshawn Adkins Roane and Leah Salgado
Weissberg Foundation

Thank you for attending today's Sovereignty Conference

The Rappahannock Tribe hosts this conference to educate the public on topics of importance to the federally and state recognized tribes in Virginia. It provides staff support to plan and recruits speakers and sponsors, register participants, liaise with the conference facility and work throughout the event.

The conference is being recorded and all in-person and virtual registrants will receive an email when the recordings are posted on the website: sovereignnationsva.org.

If you have general questions, you may contact us at: info@sovereignnationsva.org

