



## ONION FOUNDATION STATEMENT OF INTENTION

October 2022

The Onion Foundation is a family foundation whose values and priorities are very much shaped by the co-founders' deep appreciation for place—specifically, the land now known as the state of Maine—and their understanding of the value of unfettered connections to that place. The foundation recognizes that personal engagement with the land can prompt reflection and self-knowledge, contribute to good health and a sense of well-being, and offer insight into the complex ecosystem of which human beings are a small part. The land can not only provide nourishment and comfort but also build a sense of community and of belonging. It can inspire both humility and a determination to prevent and ameliorate man-made assaults that disrupt the ecosystem and degrade the environment. Given human beings' symbiotic relationship to the land, the Onion Foundation devotes many of its resources to support Maine residents' access to the outdoors, knowledge about the environment and climate change, and skills to advocate for protection of land and water resources. It recognizes that, like having unimpeded access to the arts, the other programmatic focus of the Onion Foundation, being proximate to the natural world can enrich and revitalize the whole person—intellect, body, and spirit.

With an appreciation for the essential benefits of living closely with the land, the Onion Foundation has some understanding of the trauma Wabanaki people currently experience by being cut off from their land, especially as the land is so fundamental to Wabanaki spirituality, nourishment, and arts and culture. With deep sorrow, the foundation recognizes that this trauma has been greatly increased by the deliberate destruction of Wabanaki communities by public and private forces since colonial times, which resulted in the killing of individuals, forced dislocation, and dispossession of land and culture. Lacking sovereignty, the Wabanaki people confront a web of property laws and regulations and other deprivations that continue to separate them from land and that undercut full expression of the culture and identity.

With a growing awareness of Wabanaki people's relationship to land and frequent inability to access it, representatives of the Onion Foundation were grateful to participate in the second cohort of the First Light Learning Journey (attended by the co-founder/board member and the environment program officer) as well as in the intensive workshop offered in Vermont (attended by the executive director). The First Light learning sessions exposed the policies, practices, and propaganda that relentlessly and deliberately sought to undermine the identity, cultural integrity, and land ownership of Wabanaki communities. The sessions also highlighted the resilience of the Wabanaki people, their ongoing efforts to retain and celebrate their culture through the arts, religion, language, and ritual. Most pertinent to the work of the Onion Foundation and perhaps most vexing, the First Light learning sessions set forth how the conservation movement, despite its high-minded aspirations and success in protecting land from development, has often overlooked Wabanaki people's historical ownership of and access to land; unwittingly and sometimes by design, the conservation movement has contributed to blocking Wabanaki people's use and enjoyment of the land.

The First Light Journey sessions helped the Onion Foundation to see its own role in perpetuating this injustice and, importantly, the steps it could take to address the ongoing harm. While not engaged in the

purchase of land, the Onion Foundation does support numerous land trusts and conservation programs across the state. It therefore is in the position to increase awareness of Wabanaki people's relationship to the land and the harm that restricted access to the land has on their well-being and culture. With this insight, the Onion Foundation determined that it would not be sufficient to award occasional grants to increase Wabanaki people's access to resources. Rather, with a deepening appreciation for the land-based culture of the Wabanaki people, the foundation will take steps to ensure that their land needs and expertise permeate all aspects of its environment program, including its work to improve outdoor access, nature-based education, and advocacy to prevent environmental degradation. Further, the foundation's arts program will encourage grantees to build relationships with Wabanaki artists and to examine whether they hold land to which Wabanaki people would value access.

The Onion Foundation values ongoing learning—at the individual and institutional levels—and the reflection, self-awareness, and well-crafted solutions that it generates. It strives not only to work in an equitable manner but to secure equity and justice for all Maine residents, including Wabanaki people, and to enhance their well-being. It is committed to holding itself accountable—both for how it works and the impact it has—and to being transparent about its goals, approaches, and outcomes. The foundation recognizes that the issues it is addressing are too complex and large to address on its own. It therefore values partnerships, including those facilitated by the First Light community, and seeks to develop relationships that are genuine, principled, and productive. At the same time, the Onion Foundation also recognizes the power that it holds and is committed to leveraging its relationships and political and social power to build programs, policies, and practices that are inclusive, fair, and truly responsive to the needs and aspirations of Maine residents, including Wabanaki people.

The First Light Journey challenges the Onion Foundation to put its values and principles into actions that are consequential. It asks its board and staff to relearn history, recenter Indigenous voice, and return land, land access, power, and resources to the Wabanaki people. The Onion Foundation enthusiastically embraces these goals. Nevertheless, staff and board recognize that they are just at the beginning of the journey. This Letter of Intention outlines the steps the foundation is committed to taking to move forward. Through these and other steps that the First Light community will help to identify, the Onion Foundation sincerely hopes to contribute to Wabanaki people being treated with dignity and respect, to Wabanaki culture, expertise, and wisdom becoming broadly appreciated, and to Wabanaki people increasing their access to the land.

As a First Light Ambassador, the board and staff of the Onion Foundation will:

1. Continue to educate ourselves about Wabanaki history, culture, needs, priorities: relearning history and recentering Indigenous voice
2. Consult with the Conservation Community Delegation for Wabanaki Engagement to learn about the initiatives and priorities of the Wabanaki Commission on Land and Stewardship Nil yut ktahkomiq nik (the whole earth is our home) and to identify shared goals
3. Recognize that Wabanaki priorities are multi-faceted and, like assets and challenges, may vary from Tribe to Tribe

4. Work collectively with others under the auspices of First Light, including by engaging in conversations that allow us to learn about opportunities to share resources and power with Wabanaki communities and to expand Wabanaki people's access to land and cultural resources, including through ownership and co-management
5. Participate in the First Light alliance of practitioners, including by building relationships and being open to advice and critiques of our work
6. In developing, publicizing, and implementing our grant making programs and related activities, increase awareness of the Wabanaki community's ties to the land as well as policies and practices that, historically and currently, separate Wabanaki people from the land and cultural and historic resources
7. Use our grantmaking and other activities to strengthen Wabanaki people's role in stewarding land and water
8. Inform our grantee community of our commitment to expanding Wabanaki people's access and relationship to land for their prosperity and cultural integrity
9. Request our grantees to show respect for Wabanaki culture and, when opportunities present themselves, to take steps to build (and not burden) Wabanaki people's capacity and expand their access to land
10. Use storytelling and other communication activities to share approaches and programs that successfully improve Wabanaki people's access to land or that benefit from Wabanaki people's experience, expertise, and culture
11. Help create a conservation movement that includes and reflects Indigenous expertise and perspectives, works in a transparent manner, and holds itself accountable for adopting practices and policies that advance the Wabanaki community's equitable access to resources, power, and land
12. Sponsor programs and request that our grantees design and implement programs in a manner that builds understanding of the Wabanaki community's needs, recognizes and incorporates Wabanaki expertise and perspectives, and welcomes the participation of Wabanaki people
13. Embrace initiatives, public policies, and organizations that have an explicit commitment to addressing the injustice experienced by Wabanaki people

The Onion Foundation co-founder and board member Susan Onion and program officer Tyler Kidder will serve as points of contact with the larger First Light community and keep the Onion Foundation board and staff apprised of First Light Journey initiatives and accomplishments.

Sincerely,



Susan Onion  
Co-Founder and Board Member



Diana Morris  
Executive Director