



# Welcome to the First Light Community



**Updated Program Description  
May 2023**

## Welcome

First Light is a collaboration in Maine between hundreds of leaders, dozens of organizations and five Wabanaki Tribal Governments and the Abenaki of Western Maine. We work together to relearn history, recenter Indigenous voice, and return land, money and power. We began six years ago as a series of learning journeys, today we have become a community of organizations committed to both working in solidarity with Wabanaki people and with each other.

This is your invitation to claim a seat in this community. To be part of the First Light community, organizations will need to state their intentions for how they intended to work *in solidarity with Wabanaki people and in community with other nonnative organizations who are First Light.*

### Why movement-building? Why a community?

We find ourselves at a moment of reflection for First Light, at a point of looking back to see where we have come from, and forward to see where we are going.

*Looking back:* First Light started as a small circle of those committed to relearning the history and present of Wabanaki people, the conservation movement, and their intersection here on this land called Maine. Over the past six years, that relearning has deepened, building trust and sustainable structures and changing behaviors to the point where Wabanaki colleagues share, “it’s different when we work with First Light organizations.” As non-native organizations have gone deeper in relearning, Wabanaki communities have developed the intertribal Wabanaki Commission and a strong, shared voice to speak with the First Light community.

Will the broader First Light community be ready to hear and respond to coming requests?

*Looking forward:* We feel it is very soon that the Wabanaki Commission will be in a place to point to a map and share with the First Light community a list of the most important places for return. Whether it is in six months or a year, the question is coming. Meeting that call will require more than the organizations that are currently part of the Delegation. Will the broader First Light community be ready to hear and respond to coming requests?

Will the community be ready to return their own land at Wabanaki direction? When it comes to it, will organizations be willing not just to relearn, but to throw in their weight to return something that was taken?

We don’t know the answer to those questions. We know it is crucially important to continue to prepare with a community of organizations that want to commit to heed this call. It is important to know which organizations

are ready to go beyond education to pursue deep, meaningful return. It is not that every organization has to have figured out how to do this already; we’ll work to learn and navigate the barriers together. Here are three reasons we see a need for organizations across the community to articulate, share, and hear statements of intention to this work:

1. Clarify which organizations are truly committed to the work.

First Light doesn't have the financial or human resources to train every possible organization, supporting the Wabanaki Commission and doing meaningful land return work. We want to focus our "relearning" on a defined group with whom we can go deeper and make progress.

2. Clarify what First Light work is.

If there isn't a defined community with whom we're working, how do we define the work? How do we define goals and practices?

3. Grow a movement.

First Light's work includes food security, island access, signage, money raising, land return, but there's so much more for us to do if we work on this together. How do we build a movement without having a way for organizations to claim their place in the movement, to know that they have a role?

**Our invitation to you:**

Do you share these beliefs and aspirations? The First Light community commits to working collectively with the understanding that we are stronger together; many organizations might be able to achieve what one organization could not. All of us in the First Light community want to make amends with Wabanaki people and to return things that we have or can access. We believe all of Maine will be stronger as we help to expand Wabanaki presence, relationship and belonging to this landscape. But our organizations are all different; we have different skills, timetables, and assets. We want to share the burden of learning, recovering from mistakes and making hard choices. We are excited to share each other's successes. No organization who shares these aspirations will be left out of the First Light community.

For those who seek to move forward together in the First Light community there is now a path. While there's an important role for every organization to play in helping to expand Wabanaki stewardship of land, we know that bold commitment is necessary to truly make steps towards meaningful redistribution of power and support of Wabanaki land relations.

Each organization decides their own path and pace to take their seat in the First Light community.

Being part of the First Light community is a way for organizations in Maine to demonstrate their solidarity to Wabanaki communities by stepping forward into another level of commitment to increasing Wabanaki access to land and waters through organizational change, resource sharing, and constant and continued learning. Each organization decides their own path and pace to take their seat in the First Light community. The stepping stones along this path aspire toward forward movement and continued momentum as a community in support of Wabanaki People.

Finally, through being in this First Light community, we are making two commitments to each other: to do our best to work *in solidarity with Wabanaki people* and *in community with other nonnative organizations who are First Light*. Decolonizing conservation is so much more than individual land trusts doing real estate transactions with Tribes; it's fundamentally about

all of us helping each other to learn, to share failures and successes, to share staff and budgets, to share access and land. No one organization can do this alone, together we may succeed.

Imagine First Light as 3 concentric circles. At the very center is the Wabanaki Commission on Land and Stewardship. The next concentric circle is the Delegation, the group of organizations who have devoted significant staff time to support the land return work of the Commission. The third circle is the First Light community, organizations committed to working on many projects in their local geography and beyond. The fourth circle is the wider audience of organizations, still in a process of learning and preparing to embrace commitment to this work. All of us are needed, we all move forward together.



### The Path Forward

In June 2022, at the third First Light Katahdin Gathering, Wabanaki participants affirmed their three top priorities for First Light: returning land and facilitating land access to Wabanaki communities; education and relearning efforts across Maine’s conservation community; and the development of the Wabanaki Self Determination Fund, a Wabanaki-held and Wabanaki-managed fund for rebuilding relationships with returned land. At the same time, at the close of the second Learning Journey, non-native participants in First Light asked for continued guidance and community in moving forward with this work.

We think of our response to these requests from Wabanaki and non-native communities as stepping stones. There are many actions organizations can take to move along the path to deepened commitment. The stepping stones below offer a way forward for organizations to tangibly commit to redistributing wealth and resources to Wabanaki communities; they build power-sharing, transparency, and accountability into typical land trust and other organizational practices. These stepping stones include space for both land-holding and non-land-holding organizations to enter and pursue this work.

We offer some stepping stones below. Keep in mind that there are many ways to further your organization’s commitment to Wabanaki sovereignty. If we tried to enumerate them all, we’d leave many out. You are best situated to make decisions on what your organization can do to further this work—but here are some important jumping off points, some first responses to the question, “what can we do?”

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All of these remain as strong suggestions for organizations in the First Light community, but are optional. The exception is the commitment to learn together and be held accountable to each other by our community and by Wabanaki people. Often, we need to help each other, we need more conversation and more learning to clarify the paths towards sharing resources and power. Committing to that step is core to our work as a community, so we list it first.

### Stepping Stones

As the First Light community, we commit to collective work, by...

- Learning together and holding each other accountable through continued engagement with First Light programs and connection with each other.
- Using the name *First Light* (rather than our individual organization names) on shared projects, in recognition that we all have a stake in making every Wabanaki land access project a success.

Beyond that, here are some other ideas. Organizations might commit to...

- Making financial contributions to the [Wabanaki Self Determination Fund](#), a fund of privately raised dollars from our members to be held by Wabanaki people and used for Wabanaki purposes. In 2022-2023, we are affirming our steadfast commitment to the creation of the Fund with a \$1 million Solidarity Deposit made up of contributions from First Light organizations, Maine philanthropies, and national philanthropies;
- Starting a process with Boards and members to revise organizational mission/purpose statements in, recognizing the denial of Wabanaki land relationship, and committing at a formal, core mission level to restoring Wabanaki relationships with land;
- Seeking out additional organizational learning, through...
  - o Organizational participation in a Wabanaki REACH training, or
  - o Beginning the *Preparing your organization* self-guided curriculum created by Ella McDonald and Eliza Oldach (available [here](#)).
  - o Taking part in *Rethinking the Promise of Conservation*, a virtual seminar series on some of the themes of First Light (available [here](#)).
  - o Committing involvement of at least 2 board members to the next available First Light Board Training (first training occurred November 2022 - January 2023).
- Starting a process with the Board and members to change the organization's Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws so that, should the organization dissolve, decisions around how to distribute its assets would occur in consultation with the Wabanaki Commission or other Wabanaki entity;
- Establishing 2 staff members within the organization to serve as liaisons for accountability to these commitments and help continue and grow the internal learning;
- Contributing experience and suggestions to the development of a land acquisition consultation process in which land trusts consult with the Wabanaki Commission before acquiring land, so that Wabanaki needs can proactively shape land acquisition outcomes;
- Pursuing their own processes to develop and institute creative changes unique to their organizations which truly share decision-making, resources, programs, facilities, and land with Wabanaki communities.

These are only our suggestions for stepping stones that your organization could consider. Some in the First Light community have already taken many of these steps. We know that organizational change takes time and that all organizations are different. You will decide what's right for your organization.

**Taking your seat in the First Light community**

Participation in the First Light community remains entirely by self-selection. There has never been a gatekeeper or a selection process. No one chooses who is in the First Light community; they choose themselves.

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To make their place in this community known, each organization expresses their commitment to Wabanaki solidarity through a statement of intention signed by their organization's staff leadership and board chair. Any form of a statement of intention works (e.g., letter, action plan, etc.), as long as it expresses how this organization will act *in solidarity with Wabanaki people* and *in community with First Light*. In this statement, we ask organizations to identify which of the optional stepping stones (whether one or multiple) they are working on.

These organizational statements of intention will be posted on First Light's website. They will not be edited by anyone other than those who wrote them. They will stand on their own and be gauged by the community on their own merit. These are statements of intention in their own words. We honor each.

#### Submitting Letters of Intention

When an organization is ready to take their seat in the First Light community, their organizational statement of intention should be signed by the board chair and staff leader.

Letters can be submitted to Community Catalyst, [Kara Wooldrik](#). These will be shared with the Wabanaki Commission and posted on the First Light website.

Organizations can submit Letters of Intention at any time. Organizations can rescind Letters of Intention if they are no longer able or willing to participate.

#### Supporting our community

We hope that every organization who has participated in a learning journey or other First Light program will one day choose to be in the First Light community. Given that, we are working to support the ability for organizations to do so and will continue to offer educational programming that helps to reduce any barriers to being part of the First Light community. Please don't hesitate to point out places where your organization needs more support from First Light to make these commitments. You can direct questions, comments, or concerns to Kara.

### **Backstory**

You may recognize the commitments described here as ones that were core to the idea of the Ambassadors Program. We want to explain where that program went, and how it evolved into what we offer today.

The Ambassador program developed out of what was shared in listening sessions hosted by First Light

catalysts, Peter Forbes and Ella McDonald, in November 2021 when many nonnative organizations were coming out of the learning journey hungry for a map, or stepping stones, for how to deepen their work with Wabanaki communities. They asked for help keeping their organizations actively engaged with purpose, direction, and accountability. Similarly, Wabanaki colleagues asked for deepened commitments of First Light organizations.

The first iteration of this program was launched after a process of engaging 33 First Light organizations and 9 separate program revisions between May and October 2022. Our thanks to everyone, Wabanaki and non-native, who contributed thoughts, aspirations and critiques to create this document.

Movement building is essential to First Light's work, and so is consensus making. Some in our community felt positively about becoming ambassadors while others felt that a separate program entitled "ambassador program" felt too much like a "club." To keep us moving forward together and to always be building an inclusive community, we have dropped the name and provided much more choice to your organization around how and why you will find your place in this community.

All of the ideas in this document for how to move forward together come directly from the First Light community.

As the First Light community continues to evolve, our thinking is likely to grow and change. All things change. This working document reflects our best collective thinking at the moment and offers a starting point for us to begin this journey, and in the future will be open for additional revision as we learn more.