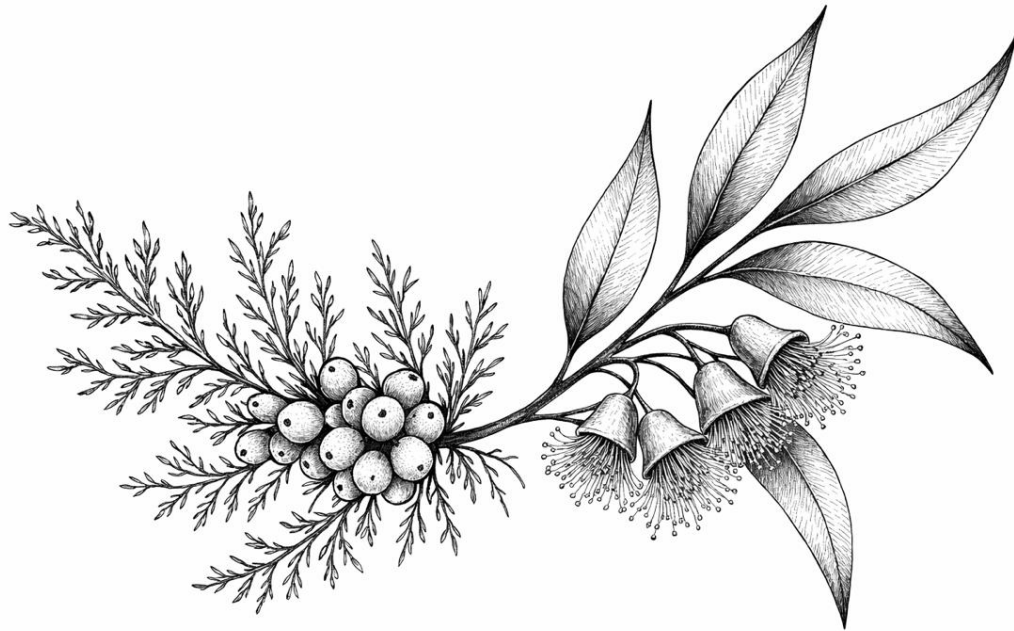


Mindimo'weyag Story Medicine Institute

Story Sovereignty Policy and Framework



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Mission and Vision

Vision

"Every story held. Every life connected. Every generation thriving."

Mission

Mindimo'weyag walks alongside Indigenous peoples and communities to transform pain into possibility through story medicine, cultural reconnection, and systems change rooted in Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and belonging.

1. Purpose

This Policy establishes how Mindimo'weyag Story Medicine Institute receives, protects, holds, uses, and relates to stories, teachings, lived experience, testimony, and knowledge shared through relationship with individuals, families, communities, and Nations.

The purpose of this Policy is to ensure that stories are never treated as extractable content, organizational property, or free resources for public use. Stories are carried within relationships, identities, histories, responsibilities, and rights. Mindimo'weyag recognizes that ethical engagement with stories requires governance, consent, reciprocity, accountability, and humility.

2. Foundational Statement

Mindimo'weyag affirms that story sovereignty means the inherent right of Indigenous Peoples, communities, families, and individuals to determine:

- whether a story is shared
- how it is shared
- with whom it is shared
- in what context it is shared
- for what purpose it is shared
- how it is stored
- how it is interpreted
- how it is attributed
- when it must be withdrawn
- what remains private, sacred, or protected

Story sovereignty includes individual and collective dimensions. Some stories belong to a person. Some belong to a family, community, Nation, ceremony, language, or collective memory. Not all stories are available for public circulation.

3. Scope

This Policy applies to all stories, teachings, narratives, testimonies, interviews, recordings, artwork explanations, cultural accounts, program reflections, participant feedback, ceremony-related narratives, case examples, photographs with narrative context, and any other forms of lived or cultural knowledge shared with Mindimo'weyag.

This Policy applies to:

- Board members
- Committee members
- Staff
- Volunteers
- Contractors
- Facilitators
- Researchers
- Evaluators
- Students
- Partners
- Funders where access is requested
- Any person acting on behalf of Mindimo'weyag

4. Core Principles

Relationship

Stories are not commodities to be collected; they are offerings that arise through trust, kinship, and human connection. A story shared in relationship carries obligations between the teller, the listener, and the wider community connected to that narrative. Story sovereignty begins with understanding that stories move through webs of accountability, not one-time transactions. The quality of relationship matters as much as the content of what is shared.

Respect

Respect means recognizing that story holders are the rightful authorities of their own experiences, teachings, and memories. They determine what can be shared, what must remain private, how their story is interpreted, and under what conditions it may be held or used. Respect requires humility, careful listening, and acceptance that some knowledge is not ours to access, analyze, or circulate.

Reciprocity

When stories generate value—whether social, academic, institutional, financial, or reputational—that value should not flow in only one direction. Reciprocity asks: what is being given back, and to whom? Return may take many forms: compensation, community benefit, co-authorship, capacity building, resources, ceremony, acknowledgment, or practical change. Reciprocity transforms storytelling from extraction into mutual exchange.

Relevance

Stories should only be invited, interpreted, or used for purposes that are clear, legitimate, and aligned with the reason they were shared. A story offered for healing should not be repurposed for marketing. A story shared for evaluation should not become entertainment. Relevance protects against mission drift, misuse, and opportunistic reinterpretation by ensuring that stories remain connected to their intended purpose.

Responsibility

To receive a story is to accept duties of care. Listeners, facilitators, researchers, organizations, and institutions become responsible for protecting confidentiality where required, representing meaning

accurately, preventing misuse, and stewarding the story with integrity. Responsibility includes knowing when not to repeat, publish, archive, or analyze a story. It also includes acting on what has been learned rather than merely consuming it.

Consent

Consent is not a single signature or checkbox. It is a living process grounded in understanding, choice, and the right to revisit decisions over time. True consent is informed, voluntary, culturally meaningful, and as ongoing as the use of the story itself. Where possible, consent can be withdrawn, amended, or renegotiated as circumstances change. Power imbalances must be acknowledged so consent is real, not assumed.

Context

Stories cannot be ethically separated from the conditions that give them meaning: history, land, language, relationships, systems, ceremony, trauma, resilience, and place. Removing context can distort truth and flatten complexity. Context protects against misinterpretation by ensuring stories are understood within the realities from which they emerge, rather than through outside assumptions or dominant narratives.

Non-Exploitation

Stories must never be used to sensationalize suffering, tokenize identity, harvest emotion, or commodify culture. Pain is not content. Identity is not branding. Culture is not a resource to mine. Non-exploitation requires vigilance against subtle forms of harm, including performative inclusion, selective quoting, trauma voyeurism, and using community narratives to advance agendas that do not serve the people from whom they came.

Healing-Centred Practice

Story processes should create conditions of dignity, safety, agency, and restoration. This means minimizing re-traumatization, offering choice and support, honouring strengths alongside struggles, and ensuring participants are not reduced to wounds or deficits. Healing-centred practice recognizes that storytelling can be medicine when held well and harm when held poorly. The measure of ethical practice is not only what was gathered, but how people were left afterward.

5. Definitions

Story Holder

A Story Holder is the individual, family, community, Nation, organization, or other collective body with recognized authority, relationship, responsibility, or rights connected to a story. Story holding is not limited to authorship in the western sense; it may arise through lived experience, kinship, cultural role, stewardship, memory, governance, or collective inheritance. In some cases, one person may speak a story. In other cases, authority may be shared or held collectively. Identifying the proper Story Holder requires attention to context, relationship, and protocol rather than assumption.

Story Sovereignty

Story Sovereignty is the inherent right of people and communities to govern how stories and related knowledge are accessed, interpreted, stored, shared, represented, protected, and used. It includes the authority to set boundaries, define meaning, determine permissions, refuse use, require conditions, and decide what must remain private, sacred, or collectively held. Story sovereignty recognizes that stories are

not neutral data or institutional assets; they are connected to identity, dignity, governance, culture, and self-determination.

Collective Story

A Collective Story is any story that extends beyond one individual and is connected to shared family memory, community experience, Nationhood, organizational history, ceremony, land, language, lineage, or common historical events. A collective story may be carried or voiced by one person, but its significance, rights, or impacts are shared by others. Because of this, individual consent may not always be sufficient for its use, and broader relational or community guidance may be required.

Sacred or Restricted Knowledge

Sacred or Restricted Knowledge refers to teachings, practices, stories, names, ceremonies, symbols, places, languages, cultural expressions, or other forms of knowledge that are not open to general access, public circulation, institutional storage, or unrestricted explanation. Access may depend on role, relationship, age, initiation, kinship, season, territory, protocol, or permission from recognized authority holders. Such knowledge must never be treated as publicly available simply because it has been encountered, recorded, or requested.

Consent

Consent is a free, informed, specific, and ongoing agreement to a clearly defined use of a story or knowledge. It must be given without coercion, manipulation, or undue pressure and with meaningful understanding of what is being requested, by whom, for what purpose, for how long, in what form, and with what potential risks or benefits. Consent is not a one-time event; it may need to be revisited as uses change. Where feasible and lawful, consent may be withdrawn, amended, or renegotiated over time.

Secondary Use

Secondary Use means any use of a story, narrative, quote, recording, interpretation, or related knowledge beyond the original purpose for which it was shared or consented to. This includes reuse in new reports, training, research, media, fundraising, policy development, promotional materials, archives, datasets, presentations, or future initiatives not originally specified. Secondary use should not be assumed. It requires renewed consideration of consent, context, dignity, and any individual or collective rights connected to the story.

6. Rights of Story Holders

Rights of Story Holders

At the heart of story sovereignty is the understanding that stories belong first to the people and relationships from which they come. Those who choose to share their stories do so as rights holders, not as subjects to be interpreted or resources to be used. Their voice, choice, and dignity remain central throughout the entire process.

Story holders have the right to choose if they wish to share, to decline, or to say that the time is not right. Consent is not assumed, rushed, or permanent. It is honoured as something living that may change as circumstances change.

They have the right to shape the conditions of sharing. This may include deciding what can be spoken, what must remain private, who may listen, how the story is held, and whether it may be recorded,

documented, published, or shared beyond the original setting. They may choose to remain anonymous, to use their own name, or to decide how they are identified and described.

Story holders also have the right, where feasible, to understand and review the intended use of their story. They may request corrections where meaning has been misunderstood or inaccuracies have occurred. Where possible, lawful, and appropriate, they may also withdraw consent for future uses that no longer reflect their wishes.

They have the right to define cultural boundaries around sacred, sensitive, family, clan, ceremonial, territorial, or community knowledge. Not all stories are meant for all spaces, and not all knowledge is meant for public circulation. These boundaries must be respected with humility and care.

Above all, every story holder has the right to be met with dignity, respect, and humanity. Their worth is not measured by the story they share, but by who they are.

Where stories are collective in nature—held by families, Nations, communities, organizations, or other groups—the responsibility extends beyond the individual. In such cases, appropriate community, collective, or relational guidance should be sought so that shared knowledge is engaged in a good way, with accountability to all those connected to it.

7. Organizational Responsibilities

Mindimo'weyag shall:

- seek consent before collecting or using stories
- clearly explain purpose and possible uses
- avoid coercion or pressure
- avoid over-collection of sensitive information
- use trauma-informed processes
- protect privacy and confidentiality
- maintain secure storage systems
- honour restrictions and conditions
- ensure accurate and respectful representation
- prevent misuse by third parties where reasonably possible
- respond quickly to concerns or breaches
- provide staff training
- build reciprocity into story use practices

Stories shall never be assumed available simply because they were shared once.

8. Consent Framework

8.1 Consent Standards

Consent should be:

- voluntary
- informed
- specific
- understandable
- culturally safe

- documented where appropriate
- ongoing

8.2 What Must Be Explained

Before consent, Mindimo'weyag should explain:

- who is collecting the story
- why it is being requested
- whether recording will occur
- where it may appear
- who may access it
- risks and benefits
- limits of confidentiality
- whether compensation applies
- how to withdraw or change permissions

8.3 Levels of Consent

Level 1 – Private Sharing Only

Used for support, circle, reflection, or internal listening only.

Level 2 – Internal Organizational Use

May be used internally for learning, planning, evaluation, or staff development.

Level 3 – Limited External Use

May be used in reports, proposals, presentations, or closed professional settings.

Level 4 – Public Use

May be used publicly in media, websites, campaigns, publications, or public events.

Consent should specify the approved level.

9. Collection and Recording of Stories

Mindimo'weyag shall minimize intrusion and collect only what is reasonably needed.

When gathering stories:

- create culturally safe conditions
- explain voluntary participation
- allow pauses or stopping at any time
- avoid leading or manipulative questions
- avoid extracting trauma for impact narratives
- offer non-recorded options
- recognize silence as a valid choice
- allow support persons where appropriate

Recording methods may include written notes, audio, video, art, or digital submissions only with appropriate consent.

10. Storage, Security, and Access

Stories and related materials shall be stored with safeguards proportionate to sensitivity.

Measures may include:

- password protection
- access controls
- secure cloud or physical storage
- limited staff access
- retention schedules
- anonymization where appropriate
- encrypted transfer where feasible

Access shall be role-based and need-to-know.

Sacred, highly sensitive, or restricted materials may require additional protections or no storage at all.

11. Use, Sharing, Publication, and Representation

Honouring the Use of Stories

Stories carry meaning, memory, and relationship. They are not raw material to be reshaped for convenience or used in ways that separate them from the intentions of those who shared them. Any use of a story must remain grounded in the consent that was given, the context from which the story emerged, and the dignity of the people connected to it.

This means stories should never be altered in ways that distort their meaning or misrepresent the voice of the storyteller. Editing for clarity or length must never become editing that changes truth, removes complexity, or creates a false impression. Context must not be stripped away simply to fit institutional agendas, public narratives, or preferred outcomes.

Stories must not be used to tokenize identity or present people and communities as symbols rather than human beings. They must not be used to exploit grief, trauma, or hardship for attention, funding, influence, or emotional impact. Pain is not a tool for persuasion, and lived experience is not a commodity.

No story should be used as proof of legitimacy, credibility, or cultural authority without the clear permission of those who hold that story. Likewise, no organization, project, or individual may imply endorsement, support, or partnership that has not been explicitly given.

The use of stories must also remain within the boundaries originally agreed upon. Rights, permissions, or access cannot be transferred, expanded, or repurposed beyond those terms without renewed consent and respectful dialogue.

Where stories are quoted, referenced, or shared publicly, the preferences of the story holder regarding attribution should be honoured. Some may wish to be named and acknowledged. Others may prefer anonymity, privacy, or collective recognition. If anonymity is chosen, identifying details should be removed wherever feasible so that confidentiality is meaningfully protected.

To hold a story in a good way is to protect both its truth and the dignity of those to whom it belongs.

12. Sacred, Sensitive, and Restricted Knowledge

Honouring Protected and Sacred Knowledge

Not all knowledge is meant to be made public, archived, analyzed, or translated into institutional language. Some teachings, stories, practices, and ways of knowing are carried within specific relationships, responsibilities, ceremonies, families, Nations, or communities. Their value does not depend on visibility, documentation, or broad access. In many cases, their strength is protected precisely through how they are held.

Where knowledge may be sacred, ceremonial, sensitive, or otherwise restricted, ordinary organizational processes should pause. Standard assumptions about collection, storage, publication, transparency, or knowledge-sharing cannot simply override cultural responsibilities. What may be routine in one system may be harmful or inappropriate in another.

In these moments, guidance should be sought from the appropriate authority holders—those recognized through community, kinship, role, protocol, or lived responsibility to speak to the matter. Authority is not always located in titles or institutions. It may rest with Elders, Knowledge Keepers, families, ceremonial leaders, language holders, or others entrusted within their own systems.

Permission must never be assumed. Silence is not consent, and access is not entitlement. If guidance is declined or permission is refused, that decision must be respected without pressure, argument, or attempts to persuade otherwise. Refusal is a valid exercise of sovereignty and responsibility.

Where access is appropriate, it should be limited only to those who have a legitimate reason and proper standing to receive it. Even within organizations or partnerships, not everyone needs access to everything. Careful boundaries are a form of respect, not exclusion.

Documentation should also be approached with caution. Recording, photographing, transcribing, digitizing, or storing knowledge may be inappropriate in some circumstances, even when intentions are positive. The ability to capture something does not create the right to do so.

When tensions arise between institutional procedure and cultural law or protocol, cultural responsibilities should be given serious priority and weight. Ethical practice requires more than compliance with administrative systems; it requires humility before knowledge systems older and deeper than those systems themselves.

Not everything valuable should be captured. Some knowledge is meant to be lived, carried, practiced, remembered, and protected rather than possessed.

13. Withdrawal, Revision, and Ongoing Consent

Consent is relational and may evolve.

Where feasible, story holders may request:

- removal from future use
- correction of errors
- updated attribution
- changed anonymity preference

- narrowing of audiences
- discontinuation of promotional use

Mindimo'weyag will act reasonably and promptly, recognizing that some prior publications or legal records may not be fully retractable.

Past use does not create automatic future permission.

14. Community and Collective Stories

Honouring Collective Stories and Shared Knowledge

Some stories are deeply personal, yet they are never only individual. They may carry the memory of families, the experiences of communities, the teachings of Nations, the meaning of ceremony, the relationship to land, or the strength of language. In these situations, a story may be shared through one voice while belonging within a wider circle of relationships and responsibilities.

For this reason, individual consent alone may not always be sufficient. A person may have every right to speak from their own experience, while aspects of that story also touch collective histories, shared knowledge, or community-held identity. Ethical practice requires recognizing when a story carries responsibilities beyond the individual teller.

Where this occurs, further guidance may be needed. This can include the wisdom of families, the counsel of Elders, the direction of Knowledge Keepers, the authorization of community leadership, Nation-specific protocols, or other shared decision-making processes grounded in the governance and customs of the people concerned. There is no single formula; the right pathway depends on the relationships, context, and community involved.

Seeking collective guidance should not be treated as a bureaucratic step, but as an act of respect. It acknowledges that knowledge can be relational, intergenerational, and collectively held. It also helps prevent harm that can arise when institutions rely only on individual permissions while overlooking broader rights and responsibilities.

Mindimo'weyag must take care not to present collective stories as privately owned property where doing so would erase collective rights. Histories, ceremonies, teachings, language, and community identity cannot always be reduced to personal possession or individual authorship. To do so can unintentionally reproduce forms of dispossession by separating shared knowledge from the people to whom it belongs.

To honour collective stories is to understand that some truths are carried together. They must therefore be engaged with in ways that respect both individual voice and collective sovereignty.

15. Research, Evaluation, and External Partners

Researchers, evaluators, media partners, students, consultants, and funders engaging with stories through Mindimo'weyag must comply with this Policy.

Additional expectations may include:

- written agreements
- ethics review where applicable
- data governance clauses

- prohibition on secondary use without approval
- return of findings to community
- culturally appropriate methods
- benefit sharing
- destruction or return of materials at project end where required

No external partnership overrides story sovereignty.

16. Staff, Volunteer, and Contractor Responsibilities

All representatives of Mindimo'weyag shall:

- complete training on this Policy
- maintain confidentiality
- follow consent conditions
- escalate uncertainty before using material
- report concerns or breaches promptly
- use respectful language
- avoid personal appropriation of stories
- avoid storing stories in unauthorized systems

Failure to comply may result in corrective action, termination of engagement, or other appropriate responses.

17. Breach Response and Accountability

Accountability, Repair, and Right Response

When a story is misused, shared improperly, distorted, or used beyond the permission that was given, the harm is not only procedural. It can damage trust, dignity, relationships, and community confidence. For that reason, any misuse of story must be met with a timely, serious, and accountable response.

The first responsibility is prompt action to contain further harm. This may include immediately restricting access, pausing circulation, removing content, stopping publication, or preventing any additional use while the matter is reviewed. Delay can deepen harm, especially when stories have been shared publicly or in sensitive contexts.

Those affected should be informed in a respectful and transparent way wherever appropriate. People have the right to know when their stories, identities, or shared knowledge may have been compromised. Communication should be guided by care, honesty, and attention to the needs of those impacted.

Accountability also requires more than technical correction. Where trust has been broken, apology and relational repair may be necessary. A meaningful apology acknowledges the harm, accepts responsibility, and commits to doing better. In some cases, repair may involve dialogue, community guidance, restorative processes, or other actions determined with those affected.

A fair review or investigation should take place to understand what happened, why it occurred, and what systems or decisions allowed it to happen. The purpose is not only to assign blame, but to identify root causes, close gaps, and strengthen ethical practice.

Corrective action should follow where needed. This may include staff education, changes in roles or access, revised processes, stronger consent measures, improved safeguards, or other practical steps proportionate to the situation. Policies and procedures should also be reviewed and improved so the same harms are less likely to happen again.

Where required, legal action or formal regulatory response may also be necessary, particularly when rights have been violated, confidentiality breached, or serious damage has occurred.

The purpose of response is not punishment for its own sake. The deeper goal is accountability, repair, restored trust where possible, and the prevention of recurrence.

18. Education and Implementation

Mindimo'weyag shall support implementation through:

- orientation for Board and staff
- annual refreshers
- consent templates
- secure systems
- partner agreements
- supervisory guidance
- culturally grounded learning processes

Leaders are responsible for modelling this Policy in practice.

19. Review and Amendment

This Policy shall be reviewed at least every two (2) years or sooner where law, technology, organizational growth, or community guidance requires updates.

Review should include Indigenous knowledge holders, governance leadership, operational leadership, and affected communities where appropriate.

20. Approval

Approved by the Board of Directors of Mindimo'weyag Story Medicine Institute on

Chair: _____

Secretary: _____

Date: _____

Closing Statement

Stories are not raw materials. They are living carriers of memory, identity, teaching, survival, and future possibility.

This Policy exists so that every story entrusted to Mindimo'weyag is met with care, consent, humility, and accountability—ensuring that what is shared in relationship is never separated from the responsibilities that come with receiving it.