

Pow Wow Etiquette: Let Respect Be Your Guide

Native American Pow Wows are social events. They should be fun – see beautiful regalia and breathtaking performances, as well as reunite with old friends and meet new ones – but, keep in mind that Pow Wows are also cultural events infused with tradition.

There is a protocol, so just be aware of a few details (especially if you're a first time pow wower) to avoid accidentally offending anyone or appearing disrespectful.

Important people to know at a Pow Wow

- **Emcee:** This is the Master of Ceremonies. He is the keeper of all information that is important.
- **Drum:** This is the drum group, the players of the beautiful music heard at the Pow Wow.
- **Head Male & Female Dancers:** These highly revered dancers will be the ones to start each song or set of songs.
- **Sponsoring Group:** This is the Tribal group responsible for the Pow Wow.

Proper Pow Wow Etiquette

Honor the protocol of the sponsoring group: Not every Pow Wow on the **Pow Wow Trail** is going to be the same. Different groups will have different customs, beliefs, and ways of doing things...after all, this is a vibrant, living culture that has evolved over time and survived many challenges. Respect these differences and embrace them.

Listen to the Emcee: The Emcee will let you know the protocol for each dance, keep you entertained, and be the go to person for any questions.

Drugs and alcohol are forbidden.

Don't sit on the benches or chairs around the Pow Wow space (unless, of course, you are given permission by the staff or Emcee): These are typically reserved for performers.

Bring something to sit on: Public seating is not always available for guests (think lawn chair /blanket). I would also bring something to drink, water bottle, a hat or visor and sun screen if attending in the day.

Be polite and aware of where you set up your chair: Guests typically set up their seating area behind the performers, but it is good practice to ask permission from the dancer (just in case he or she is reserving the space for family).

Join in the intertribal/social dances and have fun: During intertribal/social dances, you are welcome to join in and dance your heart out, but when not dancing, be quiet and respect the space.

Show respect for special songs: It is customary to stand quietly and remove your hat when special songs are played – these songs include Grand Entry, Flag Songs, Veteran Songs, Memorial Songs, and Prayer Songs. Again, listen to the Emcee – he will announce these songs and any others that require a special level of respect.

Get the okay to take a dancer's photograph: This can be a very sensitive issue and may make some dancers uncomfortable, so just be sure to ask before you shoot (this includes video as well). The Emcee will also let you know if photography is not allowed during any part of the Pow Wow.

Ask permission to record songs: As some songs heard at pow wow may be sacred, so it is best to ask the Head Singer of a Drum and the Emcee for permission first. Even though many songs may be okay to record, be aware that specific songs may not be recorded.

Give to the Drum: During a designated song or dance, it is customary to donate money to the Drum as a sign of appreciation for the the beautiful songs they bring.

If you find an Eagle Feather on the ground, do not pick it up: If you find a fallen Eagle Feather, do not touch it or pick it up – a special ceremony will need to be performed. What you can do is stand next to the feather and guard it while notifying a member of the Pow Wow staff. Please note that photographing or recording the ceremony for recovering a fallen Eagle Feather is strictly forbidden.

Show respect for the dancer's regalia: Yes, the regalia dancers may look like living sculptures that you would love to touch, but remember they are people and deserve to be treated with the same respect as you expect from others...if you feel it rude for a stranger to touch your wedding ring and personal attire, please don't touch theirs.

Do not touch the dancer's regalia: From their clothing to their jewelry and accessories, many of these items may be ancient family heirlooms. They are fragile, sacred, and irreplaceable. If a dancer drops any piece or part of their regalia, do not pick it up, please notify the Pow Wow staff for assistance.

Respect the Native culture: Some spiritually significant pieces are reserved only for those who are qualified to wear them – real Eagle Feathers, the insignia of certain societies, and even veterans colors.

Please do not point: Just like your mom always told you, pointing at people is impolite. Use your eyes to direct attention to a specific person or area, or give a nod of the head. (You might catch a few folks; point with their lips)

Respect will be your guiding light

Just show respect for everyone – whether they are Non Native or Native, children or adult, performers or guests, revered Elders or a first timer – and you'll be fine. Ask for help or questions if you don't know. As my friend always says, "Treat everyone as you would your grandmother...if you wouldn't say or do something in front of her, don't say or do it in public".