In his professional work and research, Department of Philosophy Professor Kyle Whyte says that he tries to understand how indigenous peoples can work together with non-indigenous institutions to address climate change in ways that are ethical, non-exploitative, and non-dominating.

Whyte notes that tribes face economic, cultural and political challenges with climate change, which range from difficulties in repairing damaged infrastructure to loss of cultural traditions to permanent relocation. “Yet tribes have their own time-tested methods for climate change adaption as well. Indeed, many tribes have a history of adaptive stewardship methods that they used to cultivate ecosystems for their subsistence,” Whyte says.

“Because climate change is a complex regional phenomenon—a global phenomenon—indigenous peoples, in many cases, must work with federal, state and non-governmental partners to share information about climate change trends and impacts and coordinate adaptation and mitigation efforts. And whenever you talk about collaboration, you look at whether the relationships are ethical. This is imperative in situations where one or more of the collaborative parties wields more power and influence than the others, such as the U.S. settler state and tribes.”

Whyte explores the relationships, for example, between climate science organizations and tribes, and the policies that frame interactions between tribes and non-indigenous partners in climate change contexts, from the U.S. federal trust responsibility to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

“So what I’ve done in my work is write articles and policies and engage in research that tries to understand what makes those relationships and policies ethical or not, and support tribes having morally appropriate relationships with nontribal groups as we deal with climate change and settler colonialism.

“More opportunities for collaboration are emerging based on how the U.S. federal government has funded climate change programs. Through the Fish and Wildlife Service, you have the Landscape Conservation Cooperative Program. And through the U.S. Geological Survey, you have the Climate Science Centers. USDA has the Climate Hubs now. and National Ocean and Atmospheric Administration has the Regional Integrated Sciences and Assessment centers. And there are more I’m not even mentioning here.

“So there are all these organizations doing climate science and learning how to collaborate with tribes.”

Whyte says climate scientists are increasingly valuing the potential for collaboration because they see tribes as having knowledge of climate change that climate scientists don’t
For example, climate scientists haven’t lived in certain regions for hundreds of years, as many tribes have, so they don’t have deep-time knowledge of landscape change in those areas. Also, these climate science organizations are supposed to be providing information that people in local communities can use to prepare for climate change. So they want to cultivate relationships with tribes in order to fulfill their purpose.

Addressing these emerging collaborative opportunities, Whyte’s work has led to outcomes such as the development of the Climate and Traditional Knowledges Workgroup that recently released the Guidelines for Considering Traditional Knowledges in Climate Change Initiatives. He has also conducted educational seminars for federal agencies and is organizing a summit this year that addresses ethical collaboration with tribes.

“So, then, more particularly,” Whyte explains, “in the work that I’m doing I’ve sort of split it into two areas. First, I’m interested in understanding what makes relationships ethical in knowledge exchanges between tribes and non-indigenous groups.

“And one of the problems I try to address is that indigenous people and climate scientists oftentimes think about the meaning of knowledge very differently. And so, when they talk about each other’s knowledge, they sometimes talk about it in ways that aren’t conducive to ethical collaboration.”

But Whyte says these policies can be too thin, such as when someone in a federal agency assumes it has fulfilled its consultation policy by simply sending a letter to a tribal government. Tribes often receive overwhelming amounts of such letters. Treaty rights and tribal jurisdictions are often based on the idea of fixed, immovable boundaries, which may not offer tribes equitable and culturally appropriate forms of environmental protection under certain climate change scenarios, such as a culturally significant species moving off reservation. Indeed, the establishment of such fixed boundaries served as a key part of U.S. settler strategy for dominating and assimilating indigenous peoples.

Whyte argues that the solutions to these policy issues involve the U.S. seeing its relationship to tribes as not only a matter of political obligation, but as a matter of moral responsibility. It also involves the U.S. and other settler institutions changing the way they think so that policies are sufficiently flexible for tribal adaptation and respect uniquely indigenous forms of adaptive collective action for addressing climate change.

“So I try to show that the U.S. actually should have a policy that requires that federal agencies develop more trustworthy, responsibility-based relationships with tribes. This requires not only a respect for tribal sovereignty, but also a respect for tribal cultures and pressing desire to transform the reality that current policy frameworks are not structured to facilitate tribes’ own strategies for addressing climate change.”