



# DISCUSSION GUIDE

## Borderlands: A Native Perspective

The purpose of this discussion guide is to facilitate thoughtful discussion around the topics introduced in this Indigenous Forum presentation [video](#). The discussion guide can be adapted for use in the classroom as well as salon-style gatherings.

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This [video](#) is a presentation of the 2019 Indigenous Forum, organized by the Bioneers Indigeneity Program and featured annually at the Bioneers Conference. Indigeneity is a Native-led Program within Bioneers/ Collective Heritage Institute that promotes indigenous knowledge and approaches to solve the earth's most pressing environmental and social issues through respectful dialogue. Since 1990, Bioneers has acted as a fertile hub of social and scientific innovators with practical and visionary solutions for the world's most pressing environmental and social challenges.



# INFORMATION PAGE

## Borderlands: A Native Perspective

### DESCRIPTION OF VIDEO

Tohono O'odham elder, Ofelia Rivas, discusses how the border wall affects the cultural landscape and biodiversity that spans the border between the United States and Mexico.

**Featuring:** Ofelia Rivas (Tohono O'odham)



Watch video: [bioneers.org/borderlands-bioneers](https://bioneers.org/borderlands-bioneers)

### KEYWORDS

**UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANT** – Anyone residing in any given country without legal documentation. It includes people who entered the U.S. without inspection and proper permission from the government, and those who entered with a legal visa that is no longer valid.

**INTERNATIONAL BORDER** – The real or symbolic line that divides one country or sovereign nation from another.

**O'ODHAM** – A North American cultural and linguistic group (tribe) whose ancestral territory encompassed what is now North to Central Arizona, extending south to Sonora, Mexico, west to the gulf of California and east to the San Pedro River. Today, there are four federally-recognized O'Odham tribes in North America and nine O'Odham communities in Mexico.

**TOHONO O'ODHAM** – A United States federally-recognized tribe that includes approximately 28,000 members occupying tribal lands in Southwestern Arizona.

**UNITED STATES BORDER PATROL (USBP)** – The United States Customs and Border Protection's federal law enforcement arm within the United States Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

**US IMMIGRATION AND CUSTOMS ENFORCEMENT (ICE)** – An agency within the Department of Homeland Security. ICE was created in 2003, as a part of the government's reorganization after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. The best known division of ICE is Enforcement and Removal Operations which arrests, detains and deports unauthorized immigrants already inside the United States.

**DRUG CARTEL** – A criminal organization with the intention of supplying drug trafficking operations

**JAY TREATY** – An agreement signed by the United States and Great Britain in 1794 to allow Canadian born Native Americans to travel freely across the U.S./Canadian/British borders.

**HUMAN MIGRATION** – The movement of people from one place to another with the intentions of settling, permanently or temporarily at a new location

**INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARY** – Delineates the space between sovereign states. Within its borders, a single government has complete authority, an authority that cannot be impeded by other governments.

**MEDIA BLACKOUT** – The censorship of news related to a certain topic, particularly in mass media, for any reason.

### LINKS

[Bioneers.org/indigeneity](https://bioneers.org/indigeneity) | [tonation-nsn.gov/history-culture](https://tonation-nsn.gov/history-culture) | [solidarity-project.org](https://solidarity-project.org)



# INTRODUCTION

## Borderlands: A Native Perspective

Historically, the O'odham inhabited an enormous area of land in the southwest, extending South to Sonora, Mexico, north to Central Arizona (just north of Phoenix, Arizona), west to the Gulf of California, and east to the San Pedro River. This land base was known as the Papagueria and it had been home to the O'odham for thousands of years.

From the early 18th Century through to the present, the O'odham land was occupied by foreign governments. With the independence of Republic of Mexico, O'odham fell under Mexican rule. Then, in 1853, through the Gadsden Purchase or Treaty of La Mesilla, O'odham land was divided almost in half, between the United States of America and Mexico.

According to the terms of the Gadsden Purchase, the United States agreed to honor all land rights of the area held by Mexican citizens, which included the O'odham, and O'odham would have the same constitutional rights as any other United States citizen. However, the demand for land for settlement escalated with the development of mining and the transcontinental railroad. That demand resulted in the loss of O'odham land on both sides of the border.

Following the Plan de Iguala, O'odham lands in Mexico continued to decrease at a rapid rate. In 1927, reserves of lands for Indigenous Peoples, were established by Mexico. Today, approximately nine O'odham communities in Mexico lie proximate to the southern edge of the Tohono O'odham Nation, a number of which are separated only by the United States/Mexico border.

On the U.S. side of the border, the Gadsden Purchase had little effect on the O'odham initially because they were not informed that a purchase of their land had been made, and the new border between the United States and Mexico was not strictly enforced. In recent years, however, the border has come to affect the O'odham in many ways, because immigration laws prevent the O'odham from crossing it freely. In fact, the U.S.-Mexico border has become "an artificial barrier to the freedom of the Tohono O'odham. . . to traverse their lands, impairing their ability to collect foods and materials needed to sustain their culture and to visit family members and traditional sacred sites." O'odham members must produce passports and border identification cards to enter into the United States.

On countless occasions, the U.S. Border Patrol has detained and deported members of the Tohono O'odham Nation who were simply traveling through their own traditional lands, practicing migratory traditions essential to their religion, economy and culture. Similarly, on many occasions U.S. Customs have prevented Tohono O'odham from transporting raw materials and goods essential for their spirituality, economy and traditional culture. Border officials are also reported to have confiscated cultural and religious items, such as feathers of common birds, pine leaves or sweet grass.

Source: <http://www.tonation-nsn.gov/history-culture>



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Should the Tohono O'Odham people be required to carry official documentation on their traditional homeland territory, which existed before the US government and spans the US/Mexico border?
2. Why do you think Tohono O'Odham, 'traditional people' do not recognize the US/Mexico border?
3. Why did Ofelia grow up without an understanding of the border? How is this different from your understanding of the US/Mexico border? When did you first learn about it, and how?



# VIDEO GUIDE

This guide provides a roadmap to various ideas, keywords and concepts to support video navigation.

## Borderlands: A Native Perspective

Idea, Keyword or Concept	Time Stamp
Documentation on traditional tribal lands	1:10
Relationship of Border to Water and Migrating Animals	1:50
How will the wall impact future generations?	2:12
'Traditional' people do not recognize the US/Mexico border	2:37
The border came in 1853	4:07
Tohono O'Odham lands	4:45
The border today	5:18
Impacts of waiving environmental protections at the border	6:26
US Border Control enforcement	6:55
Effects of US Mexico Border Law on Tohono O'Odham Way of Life	7:50
Impacts of Violence on Tohono O'Odham villages on the Mexico side of the border	8:22





# TRANSCRIPT

## Borderlands: A Native Perspective

Featuring: Ofelia Rivas (Tohono O'odham)

Yes, I have a passport now, but I don't have a birth record. How did that happen?

In my homelands, on my original homelands, I'm an undocumented person, and I have to carry this card, and I have to instruct my and guide my elders, "Please carry your cards. When the border patrol stops you, you need to have those cards with you, or you're going to get detained and imprisoned and deported from your own homelands," which has happened.

1:41

And so one of the elders said, "Oh, so when the wind blows, they're going to stop it and ask it for papers? And so when the water flows, they're going to stop that and ask it for papers?" And what about the migrating animals, that migrate back and forth on the lands, that have been doing it for thousands of years – the turtles, and the animals that you don't think about.

2:12

And so we wonder about that, and how that's going to impact our next generations of people, because now this wall will be there, and who knows how long this wall's going to be there. Is it going to be there from our time until forever? And what purpose is the wall? Because it doesn't stop people.

2:37

The reality of an ideal existence in our homelands is to erase all those borders. We call it an arbitrary border. It's just a line there. We cross it all the time. We refuse to recognize it, as traditional people. Our government can recognize it, but as traditional people we do not recognize it. And as traditional people throughout the lands, we should declare that we do not recognize these borders as a first action.

3:16

The reservation Tohono O'odham Nation is on a tenth of our original lands. Our original lands, before it was Mexico, before it was United States, it was a huge territory, the one in the little space right there also has the sea, all the way to the sea, all the way to Hermosillo, Mexico and to Phoenix, Arizona, as we know it now, and east of Tucson, Arizona that is now there. So those vast lands, it holds all our peoples' remains and part of the culture of our seeds that we have, and our culture, which includes sacred spaces.

4:07

The border that came in 1853 is just another part of that continuation of our devastation of our way of life. The border divided and forced communities to move by just land survey. It was just a stake in the ground, a metal stake in the ground that marked where US border and Mexico border was going to be. That forced people out of the land, to move away, and when the fences finally came, it also came with immigration policies, United States immigration policies.



4:45

But our lands became, I guess they divided people. There's O'odham—There's four O'odham bands, and those bands are the Hia-C'ed O'odham, the Ak-Chin Indian, O'odham, and Tohono O'odham.

The Tohono O'odham Nation are the largest of those four bands. We continue to be connected with people on the Mexico side called the O'odham in Mexico.

5:18

Our lands are now—The reservation is the size of Connecticut, and it's sectorized off in three sectors by the border patrol. So the border patrol have—In each sector there's 700 border patrol in each sector. And there's also an increase of that now. So our reservation is completely militarized.

It has a checkpoint at every exit, where you have to declare your citizenship, and you have to carry your documents with you everywhere you go. If you're going to go pick cactus fruit, the elders would have to take their ID cards with them, because they will get stopped and they will get interrogated by the border patrol.

6:00

When our lands became more militarized after 9/11 – and I have to say that before 9/11 there was an increase of the border patrol on the lands – and when 9/11 happened, with the bombing and all, then they officially announced that there was going to be an increase of border patrol on O'odham lands.

6:26

Homeland Security waived all 37 protective laws to build the wall. So that impacted all the people, because it impacts the water systems, the ancient water lagoons that are along the border, and also the animals that live there, and the people, and the mountains, and everything that's there, it impacts our people.

6:55

In the beginning, when they first built the vehicle barrier, they said, "Oh, it's for vehicles because there's a lot of drug trafficking and human trafficking across the land." So we said, "Okay, well then, as people, we can walk across this." But that wasn't so. The border patrol still stopped people and forced them to go around the port of entries. So that's the beginning of that.

7:20

But it's very restricted there. People are afraid because when the border patrol came, they can walk in your house and put everybody on the ground with their military rifles and interrogate them. They can stop you anywhere. They can run you off the road. They can put a gun to your head, like they put a gun to my head, asked me whether—to say if I was a US citizen or a Mexican citizen.

And then those policies that are enforced on our people that are very devastating to our mobility, our rights of mobility and our traditional—on our traditional routes that also restricts a lot of our way of life, because there's things that we need on both sides of the border, and people are either US citizens now or Mexican citizens, and they're now restricted either way, coming and going.

8:22

So, all my life I didn't know there was an international border because we'd go—My father's village is 15 miles south of the border, and other communities in Mexico, what is Mexico. So all my life we were crossing back and forth to my father's village to my mother's village, which is a quarter of a mile from the border on the US side. And until later in my life I realized it was an international border.



8:53

We continued to go back and forth to my father's community, and in 2015, the drug cartel wars began along the northern border of Sonora, Mexico, very violently just killing off entire communities. There's abandoned communities all along the border, and my father's community was attacked. They took the ablest bodied adult male and tied a rope around his neck and dragged him around in the community with a car. And then they beat him up, and he survived, but it forced all the people to leave. They were forced to leave the community. People are now still in exile, in fear, although it's been four years now.

9:48

And when in March of this year we traveled back to my father's community to—just to be there to witness and see. So it was completely abandoned for four years. So it was completely vandalized – all the tin roofs off the buildings, all the usable lumber, all the possessions that were in their homes, private possessions and things that they use in the house – tables and chairs, everything – everything was vandalized, taken, just a rubble of things they didn't use, they didn't need, I guess.

10:27

So we came back with elders, a caravan of four cars, and 13 elders got out and not one tear was shed, not one tear. We had equipment to start cleaning, and they started cleaning. They cleaned little parts here and there – the community church, the community kitchen that's just remnants of a kitchen, outdoor and indoor – and they just started cleaning because all the workers that came, we still had to feed them. So we were feeding them outside on a mesquite grill.

11:08

So those things that happened to us, it's not just us. It happened all across the border, violence of the cartels, and the corruption of the Mexican military and officials that do have—do nothing to protect the people of the lands.

11:30

We went back because we said that we didn't relinquish our rights to our community, and we're determined to rebuild our community. Those—That's just on the Mexico side of what's happening.

11:47

And I'm not sure if I—that's a part of that story, but I just wanted to say that the resilience of people is...It's inspirational when you see your elders. And if my sister was there, she would be crying the whole time. And nobody cried, and they just picked up a tool and started cleaning the community that's been abandoned for four years. So...that's the devastation that's happening on the Mexico side.

12:24

When the elders said, "Now you've heard my story, you're obligated now. It's your story. Now it's your obligation to carry on the responsibility of taking care of that, and being in defense of the land, and the whole system of which we live in, which includes the water and the land, and all the animals and the people.