



Michael Fedoroff, deputy director, Tribal Nations Technical Center of Expertise, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and Lt. Col. Robin Scott, deputy commander, Huntington District, USACE, visit the Moundville Archeological Park in 2019. Moundville is an important Native American site located outside Tuscaloosa. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

A fitting nod to ancestral homelands

Tribal Nations Center in Tuscaloosa is one of only two such centers in the U.S.

An office that works with Native American tribes is something you would expect out West — maybe New Mexico or Arizona.

A federal agency that has only two such offices put one in Tuscaloosa.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Tribal Nations Technical Center of Expertise interacts with 574 federally recognized Native American tribes, communities and organizations.

Matthew M. Grunewald is program analyst and tribal liaison for the Center's eastern office in the Tom Beville Building on the University of Alabama campus.

"We have this office that is in the eastern United States to better serve tribes with ties to the Southeast and areas east of the Mississippi, so that we're not just solely focused on the Southwest but also are here to serve other communities," said Grunewald.

Other Corps offices interact with tribes, but the only other Center of Expertise is in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Under authority from the Corps, the Center has "a national mission to assist tribal nations and be federal government or military partners for consultation with tribes," he said.

The Corps oversees infrastructure work that deals with the environment, water issues, safety and quality of life on native lands.

The Tribal Nations Center helps with communication training, document preparation, protecting and surveying archaeological resources and overviews of cultures and customs.

The Alabama office opened a couple of years ago, Grunewald said. It has two to five full-time employees and some student support.

Although it might seem strange to locate one of two offices dealing with

Native American affairs in Alabama, Grunewald said many tribes have roots here.

"There's 20 or 30 tribes that have an ancestral tie to Alabama," he said.

"We're in the ancestral homelands of numerous Native American communities, and they are still actively consulted on projects that occur here in the Southeast even though they're now residing in Oklahoma due to the process of removal," he said.

"The tribes are still very interested in interacting with the government and the military and Corps of Engineers on projects that occur here out east."

The University of Alabama has partners that can help Native American communities, he said.

"We've also got Moundville which is located just 30 minutes away. A lot of tribal people come and visit Moundville itself. It really gives an opportunity to interact with folks that are coming through and utilizing Moundville."

The federal government is required to consult with tribes and take into account impacts on their resources, he explained, "so part of that consultation may be doing an archeological study so that we can better inform the tribe as to what impact a project may have."

"Each of these tribes is unique, and they have their own perspective and their own right to speak to the federal government," Grunewald said. They are considered sovereign governments.

"If a tribe has an unmet need, we can get them in contact with the folks within the Corps of Engineers that might be able to assist them," he said.

Written for This Is Alabama by Deborah Storey