

# CAPE COD TIMES

NEWS

## 'Ultimate sign of respect.' U.S. Secretary of Interior meets with Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe



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Editor's note: A misspelled name was corrected in this story on June 20, 2023.

MASHPEE — As inter-tribal drummers and singers sang an honor song at the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribal Government Center Thursday, U.S. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland stood somber among roughly 150 Wampanoag tribal citizens.

"I'm honored to be here with all of you. Thank you for inviting us, thank you for hosting us, and thank you for being such beautiful people," said Haaland.

Haaland is one of the first Native American women to serve in Congress and is the first Native American to serve as a cabinet secretary. During her time in Congress, she focused on environmental justice, climate change, missing and murdered Indigenous women, and family-friendly policies, according to the U.S. Department of Interior website. Haaland is a member of the Pueblo of Laguna Tribe.

Before spending time with tribal citizens during a traditional Native American social, Brian Weeden, chairman of the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe, said Haaland met with members of the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribal Council, and took a tour of the Mashpee Wampanoag Museum, the Old Indian Meetinghouse, and Punkhorn Point in Popponesset Bay.

She spoke with tribal leaders like Mashpee Wampanoag Chief Earl "Chiefie" Mills, Jr. - who was raised May 6 - Chief Earl Mills Sr., and Sagamore Vernon "Buddy" Pocknett. Earlier in the day, said Weeden, Haaland also visited the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah), and headed to Rhode Island Friday to spend time with the Narragansett Indian Tribe.

"She's trying to get to know Northeastern tribes more," said Weeden.

During the visit, Sherry Pocknett was also recognized and honored by tribal citizens for winning a James Beard Foundation Award for Best Chef Northeast on June 5, for the Indigenous cuisine she serves at Sly Fox Den Too in Charlestown, Rhode Island.

## What did tribal council discuss during Haaland's visit?



U.S. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland met on Thursday in Mashpee with Mashpee Wampanoag Tribal Chairman Brian Weeden and other tribe leaders. About 150 Wampanoag tribal citizens gathered to greet Haaland. *Rachael Devaney*

During Haaland's roughly two-hour meeting with the tribal council, Haaland became emotional when the group talked about aboriginal rights and water quality issues throughout Mashpee and Cape Cod, according to Weeden.

"We are working very hard for tribes across the country," said Haaland, as she exited her meeting with the tribal council. "We are going to go back and work hard on these issues that are so important to you." Weeden said he also met with Haaland several weeks ago to talk about offshore wind issues, along with a coalition of Eastern tribes from Maine to Virginia.

A meeting with the U.S. Department of the Interior has been sought, Weeden said

"We have been asking for some meaningful consultation," he said. "So it was meaningful that she came to Mashpee. We are glad the community, including our youth and our elders, came together and took part." David Weeden, tribal historic preservation officer for the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe, said Haaland made the issues facing the Wampanoag tribe personal, and understood conditions impacting tribal citizens and the environment. "We made mention that we are a regional partner and there are regional issues and concerns. We want to work with all parties both local, state and federal to accomplish and try to improve and make strides in some of those areas," said David Weeden, who is Brian's uncle. "She was amicable to that. She was personable, and passionate about her work."

## The importance of having a Native American person as U.S. Secretary of the Interior

Haaland is also a former tribal administrator, said David Weeden, and she understands how a lack of funding can impact a variety of programming.

Haaland served as a tribal administrator at San Felipe Pueblo, and became the first woman elected to the Laguna Development Corporation Board of Directors, overseeing business operations of the second largest tribal gaming enterprise in New Mexico, according to the Department of Interior website.

'She wasn't just going through the motions.'

U.S. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland exchanged gifts with tribal elder Joan Avant Tavares during Haaland's appearance on Thursday at the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribal Government Center in Mashpee.

Trish Keliinui, a member of the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe, said it was an honor to have Haaland in Mashpee.

"She was on our soil, on our land, where our ancestors are," she said. "And she wasn't just going through the motions. It appears she had a good day and was comfortable. That makes me feel good."

Paula Peters, a member of the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe, said Haaland's visit showed that Wampanoag people are important to her.

"Her coming here makes us shine a little brighter," said Peters.



U.S. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland exchanged gifts with tribal elder Joan Avant Tavares during Haaland's appearance on Thursday at the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribal Government Center in Mashpee. *Rachael Devaney*

Haaland also visited Bridgewater and discussed - among other things - river herring

Alison Bowden, co-interim state director and director of science and strategy for The Nature Conservancy, said Haaland visited Stanley Iron Works Park in Bridgewater to learn how federal funding from the bipartisan infrastructure law and Inflation Reduction Act is making an impact on the ground.

The project Haaland viewed was the replacement of a 170-year-old bridge and removal of a dam, said Bowden. The project will open 10 river miles and about 350 acres of spawning habitat for river herring.



U.S. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland also spent time on Thursday in Mashpee with Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah) members Linda Coombs (left) and Camille Madison (right). *Rachael Devaney*

"The Nature Conservancy originated the project probably 13 years ago and we're just getting to construction now," said Bowden. "The availability of millions of dollars made a huge difference in being able to get to construction on this project."

Haaland, she said, was knowledgeable about the issues facing the local community in terms of having enough money to implement climate adaptation plans.

“We talked quite a lot about river herring and why they are important to the Taunton watershed,” she said. “She clearly had an understanding of migratory fish and their importance to communities and culture as well as to fisheries and the economy.”

## Haaland heads to Rhode Island

Aside from her visit with the Narragansett Indian Tribe, Haaland will also travel to Blackstone River Valley National Historical Park in Rhode Island Friday to highlight President Joe Biden’s America the Beautiful initiative and Investing in America Agenda, according to a press release.

America the Beautiful initiatives and recommendations aim to conserve 30% of U.S. lands and waters by 2023, according to The White House website.

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