

Information Sheet

First Nations and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada

Oral History and archaeological evidence confirms that First Nations and Inuit peoples have lived on the lands now known as Canada for thousands of years as culturally diverse sustainable communities. There is also significant linguistic diversity with over 50 Aboriginal languages spoken in Canada.

Although the cultures of Aboriginal communities vary they are bound together by a sacred tie to the land, a value of communal interdependence and a holistic worldview. This way of knowing and being is described in the following passage from the Assembly of First Nations in their submission to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples:

“Our lives were dominated by the need to fulfill our duties to our families, communities and nations. This way of life imposed an obligation on individuals to place other people’s needs first. As a result, two distinctive features- sharing and cooperation became a central focus of First Nations’ life. The people of the First Nations willingly sacrificed some individual freedom to the common good, because that way of life ensured the comfort, well being, safety and survival of the nation.”¹

Although there is evidence of contact between Nordic peoples and First Nations prior to the late 1400’s, the arrival of explorer John Cabot to the territories of the Beothuk peoples in what is now known as New Foundland in 1497 is generally considered to mark the beginning of European settlement and the beginning of colonial and assimilation policies directed at Aboriginal Peoples in the lands later to become known as Canada.

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples is a comprehensive review of the legislation, policies and practices aimed at the colonization and assimilation of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. It outlines considerable recommendations for a process of reconciliation that includes recognition of Aboriginal Rights and Title and a renewed relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the Canada. This important document includes information on topics relevant to child and family service researchers, policy makers and practitioners such as residential schools, the *Indian Act*, the tragic depopulation amongst Aboriginal peoples resulting from disease and strife related to colonization, and the links between child wellbeing and the restitution of Aboriginal community capacity at political, economic and social levels. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples is essential reading and is available for review at http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap/index_e.html.

¹ Assembly of First Nations (1993) Reclaiming our Nationhood; Strengthening our Heritage. Ottawa: Assembly of First Nations P.2.

The *Constitution Act* (1982) of Canada recognizes the rights and title of three Aboriginal groups in Canada, Metis, Inuit and Indians (also known as First Nations.) Amongst the group known as Indians (First Nations) the Assembly of Indian Affairs recognizes 633 Indian Bands (First Nations) composing over 50 cultural groups across Canada (Assembly of First Nations, 2002.) It is important to note that the *Indian Act* continues to authorize the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND) to designate Indian Bands and individuals eligible for Indian Status. DIAND recognizes 613 Indian Bands in Canada as meeting the criteria for an Indian Band pursuant to the *Indian Act* (Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 2002.)

In the 2001 Canadian Census 976,305 persons identified themselves as Aboriginal. These figures include 558, 175 Status Indians living in Canada in addition to the 418, 135 Aboriginal persons who do not have Indian Status pursuant to the *Indian Act* (Statistics Canada, 2002).

The Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development maintains a glossary of terms related to Aboriginal peoples and governments in Canada that is helpful in participating in respectful dialogue. This evolving glossary is available on line at: http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/pr/pub/wf/index_e.html.

Assembly of First Nations (2002) *Fact Sheet: Top Misconceptions about Aboriginal Peoples* Available on line at <http://www.afn.ca/Fact%20Sheets/FS-TopMisconceptions-e.pdf>

Assembly of First Nations (1993) *Reclaiming our Nationhood; Strengthening our Heritage.* Ottawa: Assembly of First Nations

Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (February 2002) *Frequently Asked Questions About Aboriginal Peoples* Available on line at http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/pr/info/info125_e.html

Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) Available on line at http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap/index_e.html

Statistics Canada (2002) *Aboriginal Identity Population (3), Registered Indian Status (3), Age Groups (11B) and Sex (3) for Population, for Canada, Provinces, Territories, Census Metropolitan Areas and Census Agglomerations, 2001 Census - 20% Sample Data* Available on line at <http://www12.statcan.ca>