Conversation Guide

History of First Nation Peoples in Alberta

This conversation guide is designed for use by instructional leaders and learning communities or as a self-paced study. It is designed to give each reader parts of "truth' that will lead individuals and groups in the direction of reconciliation. This guide is not a substitute for engaging in meaningful conversations with the indigenous community. Consult the *Advancing Reconciliation* Conversation Guide.

References

The Canadian Encyclopedia
http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca

First Nations in Alberta
https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100020670/1100100020675

Essential Terminology
https://www.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/Publications/Human-Rights-Issues/Terminology%20%20%28PD-WT-16a%29.pdf

A Long History

First Nations history in Alberta dates back at least 11,000 years and approximately 500 generations.The Milk River that runs through Writing-On-Stone Provincial Park in Alberta contains the largest concentration of First Nation *petroglyphs* (rock carvings) and *pictographs* (rock paintings) on the great plains of North America. Evidence like the rock carvings and a 10,000 year old spearhead found in Athabasca prove a lengthy and well-established way of life for the First Nations in Alberta.

First Nation Life Before the Arrival of Europeans

Prior to the arrival of Europeans in North America, the land provided the First Nations with everything they required for their mental, physical, spiritual and emotional well being. Everything in nature was seen as living; therefore, First Nation peoples respected and took care of the land around them. The land took care of the First Nations by continually growing herbs and plants for healing and providing the wildlife they needed to survive. First Nations people had established independent and organized societies across the continent prior to contact with Europeans. Many, although not all, pre-contact First Nations thrived on a matrilineal system that placed women in leadership roles and were involved in much of the decision making. Oral storytelling is how First Nations' knowledge and history was preserved and shared from generation to generation.

Pre-Contact Alberta

First Nations in Alberta prior to European contact included the Siksika (Blackfoot), Kainai (Blood), Piikuni (Peigan) and Gros Ventre (now in Montana). Other groups, including the Kootenay and the Crow, made expeditions into the land to hunt buffalo and go to war. The Tsuu T'ina, a branch of the Beaver, occupied central and northern parts of the land, while the north was occupied by the Slavey.

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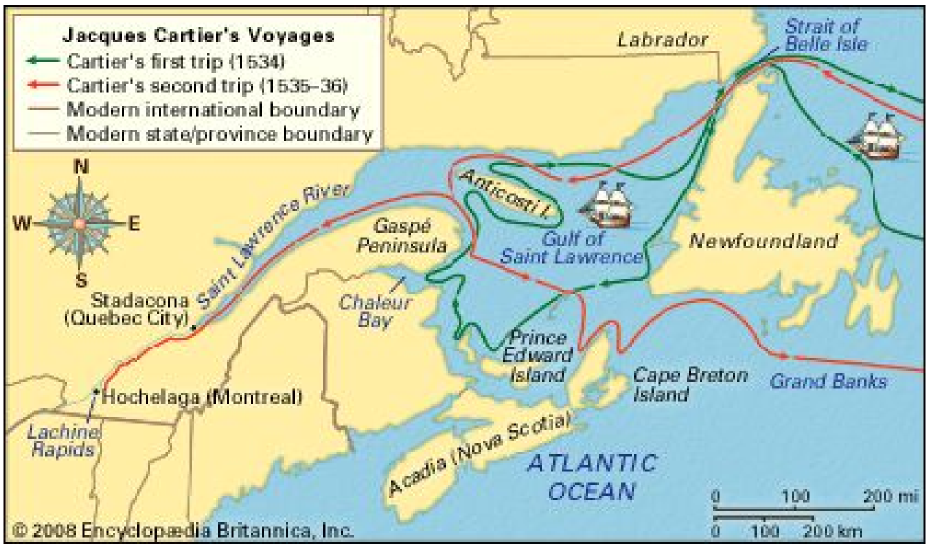
Early Contact with First Nations

Some speculate that men from England reached Newfoundland as early as the 1480s, predating Columbus's voyage of 1492. The only hard evidence points to John Cabot's English expedition of 1497 as the first known voyage to mainland North America in the new era of overseas discovery. A French explorer named Jacques Cartier arrived in 1534. He made three voyages to Canada in eight years. On his first voyage, he entered and explored the Gulf of St Lawrence. On his second, he followed the St Lawrence to the Iroquoian townships of Stadacona (Québec) and Hochelaga (Montréal). The Iroquois in this area explained that the river stretched three months' travel to the west. For the first time, Europeans had some idea of the vastness of the land. Although Cartier did not find the "great quantity of gold, and other precious things" mentioned in his instructions, he did locate the gulf's abundant fisheries and the mainland's furs, tempting Europe's commercial interests.



Over the next three centuries the French, British and other European settlers would continue to prosper from the fisheries and the fur trade in the east. Through many wars and battles that involved land and the establishment of colonies, settlers and explorers gradually started to move further west.

Westward Expansion

Canada West grew rapidly because of steady immigration from England, Scotland, Ireland and the United States. Many newcomers cleared the forests, cut lumber and worked the rich soil. Increasing demands for land forced people to look further to the west for settlement.

With the fur trade in decline, the British government and leaders in British North America became interested in the agricultural potential of the prairies. In 1867, the Dominion of Canada was created. In 1870, Canada purchased Rupert's Land and the North West Company from the Hudson's Bay Company, labelling the entire western and Arctic region the North-West Territories. In 1874, Canada began asserting its presence in what would become Alberta, sending the North West Mounted Police across the prairies to present-day Lethbridge to establish Fort Macleod. In 1875, the Mounties built forts in present-day Calgary and Edmonton. The Canadian Pacific Railway reached Calgary in 1883.

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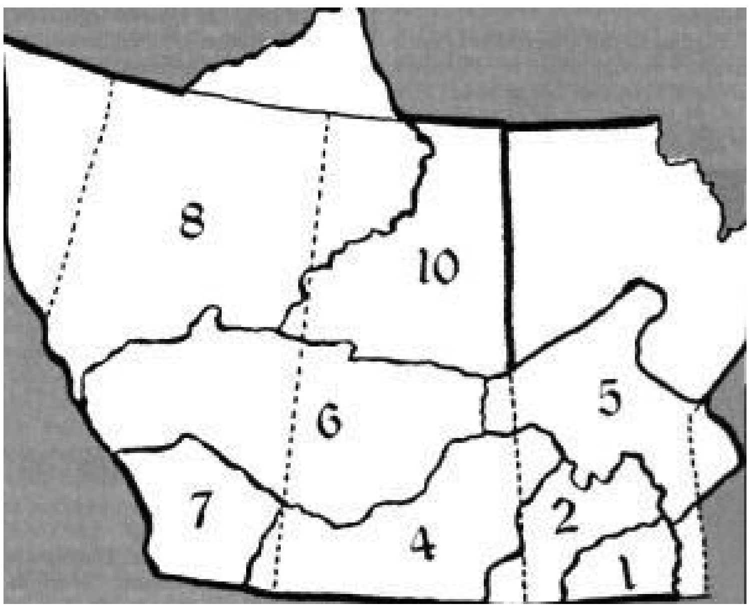
Numbered Treaties

The Numbered Treaties were a series of 11 treaties made from 1871 to 1921 between the Canadian government and Indigenous peoples. The government thought the treaties would help to assimilate Indigenous peoples into white, colonial society and culture. The First Nations viewed the treaties as a way to negotiate the sharing of their traditional territories.

Treaty-making was so important that opening and closing ceremonies were part of the process and people travelled long distances to arrive at the negotiation locations to witness the event. In exchange for their traditional territory, government negotiators made various promises to Indigenous peoples, including special rights to lands, the distribution of cash payments, hunting and fishing tools and farming supplies. These terms of agreement vary by treaty and are controversial and contested. Treaties still have ongoing legal and socioeconomic impacts on Indigenous communities. Alberta Treaties 6, 7 and 8 were signed between 1876-1899. For more information, see the *Alberta Treaties 6, 7, 8 Conversation Guide.*



(Left): Numbered treaties in the prairies.

Confederation and First Nation People in Alberta

Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier met with other government officials and drew up a bill to unify the districts of Alberta, Saskatchewan, Assiniboia, and Athabasca. After further considerations, it was decided that the proposed province would be too big to unify.

This area was then split into Alberta and Saskatchewan and Canada adopted the *Alberta Act* on September 1, 1905. The creation of Alberta did not greatly changed the lifestyle for the First Nations in the new province. First Nations were still the responsibility of the federal government. The *Constitution of 1867* made the federal government responsible for “Indians, and Lands reserved for the Indians.” The *Indian Act* of 1876 also made “Indians” wards of the federal government. The original inhabitants of Alberta were not asked to participate in politics and were left out of much of the political negotiations dealing with land or laws. First Nations people were finally allowed to vote in provincial elections in 1969.

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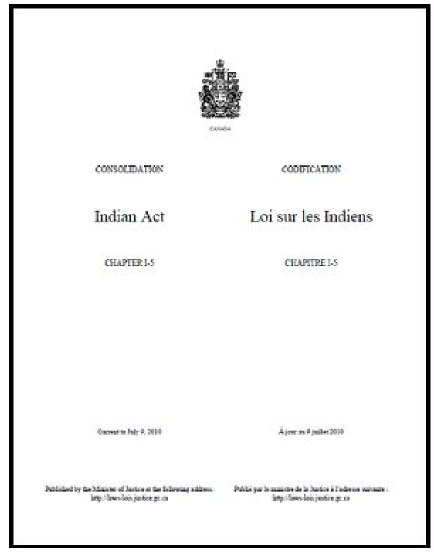
Assimilation Policies

The signing of the treaties and the implementation of the *Indian Act* were not the first attempts to assimilate First Nation people into white society. The government started to impose harsh restrictions on First Nations people long before the 1800s. Each policy and written law that was created was essential to assimilating First Nations into society. Language, land use, educational practice, traditional ceremonies and spiritual practices were all directly affected by the policies throughout the years. Following are some examples.

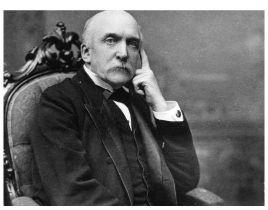
1847 Report on Native Education proposes that the separation of children from their parents would be the best way to achieve assimilation. In this report, Egerton Ryerson, Superintendent for Education recommended that First Nations education should focus on religious instruction and agricultural training.

1857- The *Gradual Civilization Act* is part of a the government's efforts to use policy to assimilate Indigenous peoples to the economic and social customs of European settler society.



CONSOLIDATION	CODIFICATION
Indian Act	Loi sur les Indiens
CHAPTER I-5	CHAPITRE I-5

1876: The *Indian Act* gives the Department of Indian Affairs authority to create policy in regard to "Indian matters" by determining status, managing land, setting up elected band councils as governing bodies on reserves and helping to "civilize" the people. Indian Agents were appointed to assert policy on reserves, including the implementation of the pass system in 1885. First Nation peoples living on a reserve had to carry a pass, approved by the agent, that stated their reason for being off the reserve and how long they would be gone.



1879: The Davin Report Sir John A Macdonald sends Nicholas Flood Davin to meet with U.S officials to discuss their strategy on the education for First Nations children. He made recommendations regarding how the American "boarding school" model could be implemented in Canada to assimilate First Nations children. This was the birth of most Residential schools in Canada.

1892-1996: Residential Schools operate as late as 1996. Residential schools eventually became compulsory and attendance was strictly enforced. In the early years, children were involuntarily taken from their families and did not return until the summer months. Children as young as five were sent and were not free from the system until they were in their teenage years. Children were forced to abandon their languages, their ceremonies, their family life and their traditional way of living. Life at residential schools was difficult, with most children later disclosing horrific encounters at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's seven national events across Canada. Alberta had the most residential schools in Canada.

1969: The "White Paper" is proposed by Prime Minister P. Trudeau to dismantle the *Indian Act*, ending the special legal relationship between Aboriginal People and Canada and moving responsibility for Aboriginal issues to the provinces. This was met with strong opposition from First Nations across the provinces, who thought the federal government was absolving itself of historical promises and responsibilities. In response, Trudeau withdrew the White Paper in 1970 and angrily stated: "We'll keep them in the ghetto as long as they want."

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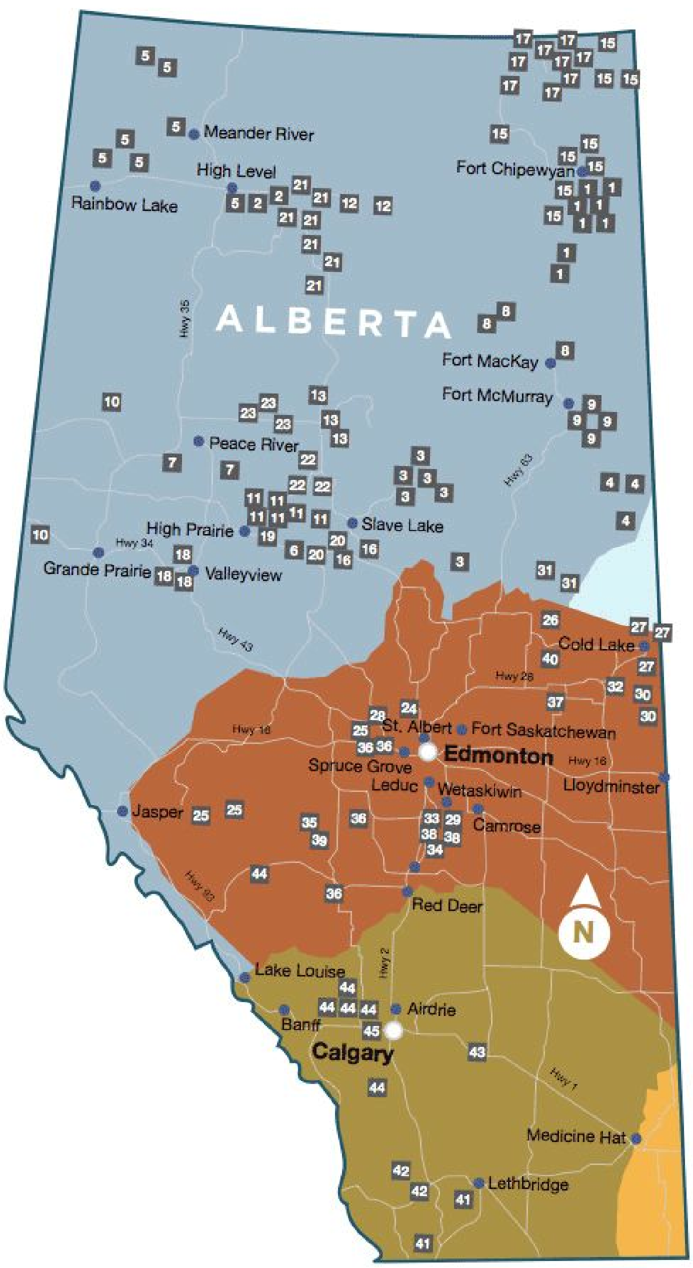
Contemporary Indigenous Alberta

Today, there are 46 First Nations within Alberta. The most commonly spoken First Nations languages are Kainai (Blackfoot); Cree; Chipewyan; Dene; Sarcee; and Stoney (Nakoda Sioux).

There are three treaty areas (6,7 and 8) in Alberta, with Treaty 4 covering a small portion of southeastern Alberta and Treaty 10 covering a small portion of east-central Alberta. For more information, see the *Alberta Treaties 6, 7, 8 Conversation Guide.*

There are eight formal Métis settlements in Alberta. For more detailed information, see the *Métis in Alberta Part 1 and Part 2 Conversation Guide*s.

First Nation Communities in Alberta



First Nations in Alberta

1. Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation
2. Beaver First Nation
3. Bigstone Cree Nation
4. Chipewyan Prairie First Nation
5. Dene Tha' First Nation
6. Driftpile First Nation
7. Duncan's First Nation
8. Fort McKay First Nation
9. Fort McMurray First Nation
10. Horse Lake First Nation
11. Kapawe'no First Nation
12. Little Red River Cree Nation
13. Loon River First Nation
14. Lubicon Lake Indian Nation (no reserve)
15. Mikisew Cree First Nation
16. Sawridge Band
17. Smith's Landing First Nation
18. Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation
19. Sucker Creek First Nation
20. Swan River First Nation
21. Tallcree First Nation
22. Whitefish Lake First Nation (Atikameg)
23. Woodland Cree First Nation
24. Alexander First Nation
25. Alexis Nakota Sioux First Nation
26. Beaver Lake Cree Nation
27. Cold Lake First Nations
28. Enoch Cree Nation
29. Ermineskin Cree Nation
30. Frog Lake First Nation
31. Heart Lake First Nation
32. Kehewin Cree Nation
33. Louis Bull Tribe
34. Montana First Nation
35. O'Chiese First Nation
36. Paul First Nation
37. Saddle Lake First Nation
38. Samson Cree Nation
39. Sunchild First Nation
40. Whitefish Lake First Nation #128 (Goodfish Lake)
41. Blood Tribe
42. Piikani Nation
43. Siksika Nation
44. Stoney Tribe
    - Bearspaw (Eden Valley)
    - Chiniki (Morley)
    - Wesley (Big Horn)
45. Tsuu T'ina Nation

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