

CHC2P Unit 5: Canada's Century

Activity 1: Canada's Aboriginal Peoples

Overview

In this activity, you will consider the role and heritage of Aboriginal people in Canada.

Lesson

Aboriginal Origins of Canada



Canada's first peoples are linked to the name of our country. French explorer Jacques Cartier noted in 1536 that "kanata" (now Canada) was an Iroquois word meaning town, or cluster of dwellings.

According to Section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982, "Aboriginal peoples of Canada" includes the Indian, Inuit and Métis peoples of Canada. The designation "Indian" was applied by early Europeans, who believed that they had landed in India.

The term "First Nations" refers to Aboriginal groups that first met the Europeans; it does not include the Inuit (formerly called Eskimos) and Métis (people of mixed Native and European bloodlines).

Aboriginal Rights and Accomplishments



In previous activities, you learned about the Indian Act of 1876, attempts at assimilation, residential schools, and the concept of "status Indian."

Aboriginal leaders worked successfully to include the following statement in the Constitution Act 1982: "The existing aboriginal and treaty rights of the aboriginal peoples of Canada are hereby recognized and affirmed."

More than 3,500 Aboriginal people in Canada fought in the First World War, including Tom Longboat. Approximately the same number served in the Second World War and the Korean War. Many Aboriginal soldiers became snipers or reconnaissance scouts. They used their traditional hunting and military expertise to carry out dangerous tasks courageously.

Cree soldiers worked as "code-talkers" in World War II. To hide their meaning from the enemy, military messages were sent in the Cree language, and then de-coded by Aboriginal language experts.

Status and Canadian Court Decisions



In the past, Aboriginal peoples in Canada have experienced legal discrimination. For example, until 1970 an Aboriginal person could not drink alcohol outside a reserve. The Indian Act discriminated against Native women by stripping them of their treaty and Aboriginal rights if they married non-status Indians. In 1985, the Canadian government's Bill C-31 reinstated 76,000 women who had lost their "Indian Status" through marriage.

Today, First Nations and Inuit people have the same rights as other Canadians, and they also are eligible for treaty benefits.

Among these are tax exemptions, as well as medical, educational, and housing support.

The Federal Government recognizes that Aboriginal people have a right to self-government, a right to manage their own affairs. In their communities, Canada's First Nations, through elected Band Councils, make decisions about local matters.

Aboriginal groups in the Northwest Territories and Nunavut have the opportunity to develop self-government arrangements. In Nunavut (formed in 1999), this is possible because the territory contains 85% Inuit citizens. In 2000, the 6,000 Nisga'a people of northwest British Columbia negotiated self government that allows them control over resources, finances, family welfare, and justice services. Eight Métis settlements in Alberta achieved self government in 1989. They have a 40-member council that makes laws equal in status to provincial laws, and is responsible for such issues as hunting rights and oil and gas development.

Decisions by the Supreme Court of Canada have supported Aboriginal rights. In both *R. v. Sparrow* (1990) and *R. v. Marshall* (1999), the court recognized Aboriginal fishing rights. In the case of *R. v. Powley* (2003), the highest court recognized the hunting rights of the Métis Nation.

Challenges Faced in Aboriginal Communities

Canada has frequently been ranked as the number one country in which to live by the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI). The index measures such factors as poverty, literacy, education, and life expectancy. Canadian citizens have been justly proud of this achievement. Statistics for Canada's Aboriginal peoples, unfortunately, do not fully mirror Canada's high ranking.

Compared to other Canadians, Aboriginal people live shorter lives, receive less education, make less money, live in more inadequate housing conditions, experience more health problems, and face much greater rates of imprisonment. All citizens should be challenged to find answers to the problems of this and other inequities in Canadian society.

Assignment

1. What three groups make up the Aboriginal peoples of Canada?

2. Aboriginal peoples have worked to achieve recognition of their Aboriginal and treaty rights. List three examples of the achievement of that recognition.
3. Conduct research to find information on the following topics related to Aboriginals in Canada and indicate the source of your research. Mention what you have learned about Aboriginal issues from your research. Write a minimum of two paragraphs for each.
 - The death of Helen Betty Osborne, The Pas, Manitoba, 1971
 - The death of Neil Stonechild, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, 1990
 - Oka, Quebec crisis 1990
 - The death of Dudley George at Ipperwash, Ontario 1995