

First Nations Treaties in Alberta: Treaty 6

Guiding Question

What is a treaty and why are treaties with First Nations significant to Alberta society today?

Introduction

Treaties are constitutionally binding agreements between sovereign nations that set out the conditions for a peaceful alliance and reflect the worldviews and understanding of identity by the signing peoples. They outline the rights, obligations and benefits of the signing parties to each other. The treaties in Canada are between the Signing First Nations and the Crown. From the perspective of Indigenous people, treaties are agreements, voluntarily entered into by both parties which provide for peaceful relations between the two nations. They are more than simple written documents: they are sacred agreements between the First Nations people and the British Crown with the Creator to witness. There are 11 numbered treaties across Canada, with Treaties 6, 7 and 8 encompassing most of Alberta. The intent and provisions of the treaties does not end. Treaties last, *"as long as the sun shines, the grass grows, and the rivers flow."*

The reasons to sign treaties differed for the two signatory groups. The British Crown and later the Canadian government wanted land for agriculture, settlement and resource development. The signing of the treaty was to relinquish Indigenous title to land so that the Crown could then exert claim. The First Nations were concerned with the spread of disease, such as smallpox, and the dramatic disappearance of the bison, a main food source. They felt the signing of the treaty would ensure the survival of their people. The pipe ceremony conducted prior to the signing of the treaty had strong cultural and spiritual

significance. Participating in the sacred ceremony required the signing parties to speak the truth during negotiations.

Treaty 6

Treaty 6 was first signed on August 23, 1876 at Fort Carlton and on September 9, 1876 at Fort Pitt, Saskatchewan between the Crown, Cree and Saulteaux.

Adhesions (further signatories), were made throughout Saskatchewan and Alberta including Fort Edmonton in 1877, Sounding Lake in 1879, and Rocky Mountain House in 1944 and 1950. It covers the central west portions of present day Alberta and Saskatchewan.

What obligations, rights and benefits are included in Treaty 6?

All treaties included the surrendering of large parcels of land to the Crown in exchange for reserve land. First Nations signatories to Treaty 6, however, believed that they were agreeing to share the land and its resources, rather than to completely surrender it to the Crown. Benefits promised the First Nations included farm equipment, farm animals, annual monetary payments, ammunition, and rights to hunt and fish on reserve land. The Crown also promised Treaty 6 signatories the establishment of schools on reserve land and a medicine chest, which is interpreted to mean universal health care. To address the concern over loss of traditional food sources, a promise of rations during times of pestilence and famine was added.

Who are the people of Treaty 6 in central Alberta?

Treaty 6 encompasses 19 First Nations in central Alberta including Cree, Nakota Sioux, Saulteaux, and Dene Suliné peoples:

Dene Suliné -The Cold Lake First Nations is the governing body for people descended from several different Dene Suliné historic groups in Treaty 6. They occupy the territory around present-day Cold Lake, in the northeast of the

province close to the Saskatchewan border. Dene people were also known as Chipewyan, a Cree term that refers to their manner of dress. *Chip-way-yan Enoowuk* means "pointed-hood-wearing people". With the creation of the Cold Lake Air Weapons Range in 1952, Cold Lake First Nations lost of much of their traditional territory and continue to fight to practice their treaty rights.

The Paul First Nation, or Paul Band, is of mixed Cree and Nakoda origin.

Nakota Sioux Nakota Sioux were also known as Stoney, which refers to the custom of preparing food using heated stones; the Cree term for stone is *asini* and the Sioux term is *pwatuk*. The French wrote the word as *Assiniboine*. In parts of Canada, they are known as Assiniboine. Nakota Sioux are descendants of individual bands of Dakota, Lakota and Nakota. The Alexis Nakota Sioux Nation is located near the sacred lake *Wakamne*, or Lac Ste Anne. The lake remains a spiritual centre during the annual Lake Ste Anne pilgrimage. Reserve land was also created near Hinton and Whitecourt on historical hunting territories.

Saulteaux Saulteaux is a French term, "*people of the rapids*", for the plains Ojibwa, or Anishinaabe, who moved onto the west from the Sault Ste Marie area of Ontario. O'Chiese First Nation is located near Rocky Mountain House. O'Chiese people today are of Saulteaux and Cree ancestry. The O'Chiese First Nation resisted signing a treaty until 1950. There are a variety of interpretations of where the Saulteaux people of O'Chiese derived from. Their history states that the people of O'Chiese came from various areas. Some accounts of how an Anishnabe group of people settled in western Alberta state that they were resisting capture by colonizers and continued fleeing west until they were forced to settle in the area now known as O'Chiese. Anishinabek people are most commonly found in central Canada.

Professional Practice Application

"Treaties are the basic building blocks of the relationship between First Nations and the rest of Canada."

Office of the Treaty Commissioner Saskatchewan

Reconciliation is about understanding the past and working together to build a new future. First Nations people today view the treaties as a sacred covenant that applies to all the land in the treaty area, not just reserve land. "We are all treaty people" means that we all have rights and obligations with respect to the treaty area. Many school jurisdictions and schools demonstrate understanding of treaties during meetings and events by acknowledging the historical rights and contributions of First Nations people who have shared their land with Canadians. Statement of treaty acknowledgements are also posted on the walls of some school buildings. As well, introducing First Nations elders and leaders who are in attendance shows honour and respect for our peaceful coexistence and shared community.

Questions

- a) What does the phrase, "We are all treaty people" mean? Do all people of Treaty 6 benefit equally?
- b) How does differing worldviews impact the interpretation of treaty provisions in modern times?

For Further Study

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