



Wapikoni Teaching Guide: An introduction to the diversity of Indigenous cultures in Canada

(Without Appendices)



Wapikoni

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About Wapikoni

Co-founded in 2004 by the Conseil de la Nation Atikamekw [Council of the Atikamekw Nation], the Conseil des Jeunes des Premières Nations [First Nations Youth Council of Quebec and Labrador] and filmmaker Manon Barbeau, Wapikoni Mobile is a travelling studio for Indigenous youth to express themselves, to receive training and to create. Its mission is to amplify the voices of Indigenous youth through film and music, to disseminate their work across Canada and abroad, and to be a vehicle for professional development and social transformation.

Since its inception, thousands of youth from 27 different nations have contributed to creating more than 1,000 short films, which have been translated into several languages and have garnered numerous awards and distinctions at national and international festivals. Wapikoni is a not-for-profit charitable organization supported by a number of private and public sector partners and has been an official UNESCO partner since 2017.

About CCUNESCO

The Canadian Commission for UNESCO serves as a bridge between Canadians and the vital work carried out by UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. It promotes UNESCO values, priorities and programs in Canada and gives civil society experts a voice on the international stage. Through its efforts, it contributes to a peaceful, fair and viable world where nobody is left behind.

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Message from the Wapikoni directors

The valuable relationship that led to the development of this teaching guide, intended for UNESCO associated schools, was built bit by bit. Several encounters at public events spread out over a number of years have given various CCUNESCO members the opportunity to discover Wapikoni's work.

The activities carried out by Wapikoni were presented at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights as part of the 56th CCUNESCO Annual General Meeting, held in Winnipeg in 2016. We were able to meet with members of UNESCO associated schools and strongly express our wish to collaborate with them. At this event, Wapikoni was able to launch new projects and strengthen its ties with the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR), thereby raising awareness about the rights of Indigenous peoples in Canada through film.

The ties have only become stronger since, both with the CCUNESCO, a crucial ally in terms of cooperation, culture and education expertise, and with UNESCO, through an official partnership struck in 2017.

This turnkey guide is essentially the fruit of an alliance that will help build bridges between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, equip teachers, and contribute to the process of “reconciliACTION” through film.

Wapikoni is pleased to make this guide available to teachers and professionals working in the UNESCO Associated Schools Network in Canada. This teaching guide is more than a cultural mediation project—it features varied Indigenous youth perspectives, providing a panorama of viewpoints based in modernity. It is also a reference and a source of inspiration, a stimulating project that will undoubtedly foster closer relationships between peoples and, ultimately, respectful and harmonious coexistence.

Raising awareness of Indigenous realities among the general population is a Wapikoni priority. We hope that this mediation tool will be useful and appreciated, and that it will enable us to progress together towards an inclusive society that celebrates its plural identity.



Odile Joannette
Director General



Manon Barbeau
Founding Chair

Message from the Secretary General of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO

The Canadian Commission for UNESCO (CCUNESCO) is proud to partner with Wapikoni for the creation and dissemination of this teaching guide. We hope that it benefits students and teachers who wish to learn more about the rights, stories, cultures and dreams of Indigenous peoples. We also hope the guide can contribute to efforts being made in schools to make reconciliation a shared priority and responsibility.

Wapikoni has accomplished remarkable work since 2004, giving Indigenous youth the resources they need to express themselves freely on topics that matter to them. More than 1,000 short films have been made to date—1,000 windows into the worlds of inspiring young people, showing us what they are going through and what excites them.

By viewing the original work and exploring the contemporary themes covered in this guide, students can discover and examine a variety of artistic expressions, cultures and realities faced by Indigenous youth today. Teachers will appreciate the instructional material designed to help them address crucial themes intended to aid the advancement of reconciliation efforts in schools and society at large.

Education and the media arts have a key role to play in reconciliation, respecting the rights of others and being open to the world around us. This is why UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, entered into an official partnership with Wapikoni in 2017. We are positive that this guide will encourage youth and the adults who support them to play an active role in reconciliation by developing friendships and collaborating with Indigenous peoples.



Sébastien Goupil
Secretary General

How to use this guide

Through this teaching guide, we hope to encourage high school teachers to address Indigenous culture-related topics with their students. To that end, we have selected 12 short films produced by Wapikoni and directed by Indigenous youth from across Canada, spotlighting their perspectives and those of their communities on Indigenous topics and issues.

The content we developed is intended to introduce key concepts for addressing the various themes around Indigenous cultures in class, viewing the films with the students and sparking dialogue and debate.

This guide was designed to provide ready-to-use material that could be adapted based on the grade level and the subject matter being taught. Each theme has been sorted into a general theme and assigned a distinct colour to help the teacher find it more easily.

Each film sheet was designed to be shared with students and can be printed out to be handed out in class. The fact sheets are at the end of the guide.

This guide is an introduction to the various Indigenous cultures and perspectives in Canada.

Your comments and questions matter to us—send them to guide.info@wapikoni.ca.

Each film sheet is made up of:

- ✓ one page with information about the film;
- ✓ one page with information about the Nation, including a map identifying the Nation's ancestral lands and, by the same token, the filmmaker's community;
- ✓ one page with content for revisiting the film with the students, which can include activities, discussion topics, and additional information about the themes explored in the film.

Wapikoni Teaching Guide: **An introduction to the diversity of Indigenous cultures in Canada**

Introduction

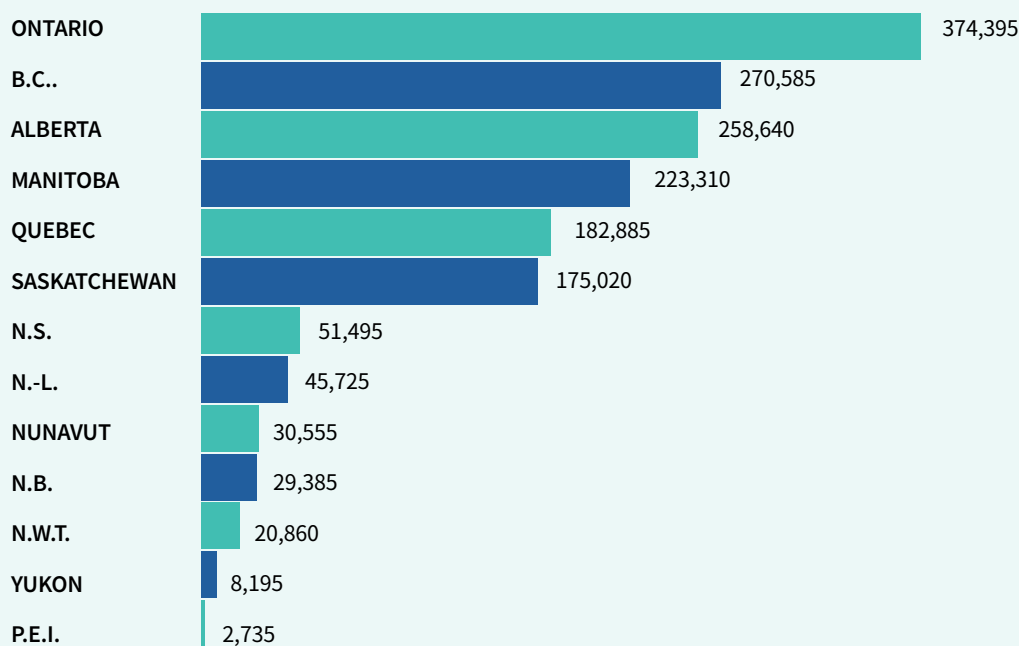
In recent years, several initiatives have been implemented in Canada to enhance our knowledge of the histories, cultures, issues and realities of Indigenous peoples. Education, togetherness and dialogue remain the drivers of change, the end of prejudice, improved relations and true reconciliation.

This guide is a turnkey tool to facilitate the teaching of Indigenous content in Canadian high schools. Its content, activities and layout were designed for maximum accessibility for teachers and interest for students, while reflecting the diversity of Indigenous cultures and issues in Canada.

Indigenous populations in Canada

Data from the [2016 census](#) revealed there were more than 1,673,785 Indigenous people living in Canada, accounting for approximately 4.9% of the total population. Indigenous people are the fastest growing population in Canada—in fact, between 2006 and 2016, the number of people who identify as Indigenous increased by 42.5%. What's more, Indigenous people are the youngest population in Canada: 44% of them are under 25.

The Canadian Constitution recognizes three Indigenous groups: the First Nations, the Métis and the Inuit. The First Nations are the largest group, followed by the Métis and the Inuit. Ontario is the province with the greatest Indigenous population—nearly one-fourth of all Indigenous people in Canada live in Ontario. Since Ontario is the most densely populated, though, Indigenous people make up only 2.8% of its total population. By contrast, they make up more than 85% of the population in Nunavut.



Source: [Statistics Canada](#)

Indigenous populations by province and territory

Yukon

23.34% of the population

NATIONS

- Athapaskan
- Inuit
- Tlingit

Northwest Territories

50.71% of the population

NATIONS

- Cree
- Dene
- Inuit
- Métis

Nunavut

85.88% of the population

NATION

- Inuit

British Columbia

5.93% of the population

NATIONS

- Heiltsuk
- Kitamaats
- Kwakwaka'wakws
- Heiltsuks
- Nisga'a
- Oowekyalas
- Secwepemc (Shuswap)
- Tla'amin (Sliammon)

Alberta

6.5% of the population

NATIONS

- Chipewyan
- Cree
- Dene
- ȩyāhé Nakoda (Stoney, Sioux)
- Kainai
- Siksika (Blackfoot)
- Tsúùt'ínà (Sarcee)

Saskatchewan

16.4% of the population

NATIONS

- Anishinaabe, Ojibwe (Algonquin)
- Cree
- Dene
- ȩyāhé Nakoda
- Métis

Manitoba

18% of the population

NATIONS

- Anishinaabe (Algonquin)
- Cree
- ȩyāhé Nakoda
- Métis

** This map is a general overview and does not necessarily show each nation's traditional name. It shows some of the larger Indigenous families and groups without mentioning each community or nation. Additionally, several names and spellings may differ from one province or community to another. For accurate information about names and actual borders, contact the nations directly.*

For more information: [Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada](#)



Who are the Indigenous peoples of Canada?

What are the first inhabitants of this land called? There is more than one right answer and though the question can cause confusion, the following definitions will undoubtedly help shed light on the matter.

First Peoples: This relatively new term applies to First Nations, Inuit and Métis people.

Indigenous: Native, through ancestral ties, to the country he or she inhabits. In Canada, this term applies to First Nations, Inuit and Métis people.

First Nations: Term used by non-Inuit Indigenous nations in Canada to describe themselves. This term does not apply to Métis people.

- **Nation:** Term used to refer to various clans, families or communities who share a common culture, a language or certain traditions.
- **Community:** Generally speaking, members of First Nations will describe themselves as belonging to a particular nation or community within that nation, for example, an **Atikamekw** (Nation) person from **Wemotaci** (community).

Inuit: Group which has social, cultural and linguistic commonalities and a shared ethnic origin associated with the north of Canada. Note that “Inuit” (singular: “Inuk”) means “human being.”

Métis: People of mixed Indigenous and European ancestry, making up one of the three groups recognized by the Canadian Constitution, with its own history and cultural identity. The term refers to the people from the Métis Nation, not to people who are otherwise of mixed origin.

For more information: [Statistics Canada](https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/95-02/2016001/article/14861-eng.htm)



Historical context

To better understand the current issues and realities of First Peoples, let's take a look at the past.



Before contact


The story of Indigenous peoples, their cultures, their perspectives on the world and their way of life begins long before the arrival of Europeans. In fact, by the time Europeans materialized on their shores, the First Peoples had lived in socially, culturally and politically organized societies for thousands of years. Before Canada became Canada, before the first fishing boats could be seen off the Newfoundland coast, this vast territory was home to Indigenous governments that oversaw the distribution of land and resources and forged diplomatic, political and economic alliances with each other.

While the theory whereby Indigenous peoples came to the American continent by way of the Bering Strait is the most widespread, other theories exist, such as those suggesting Indigenous people sailed here. These theories could help explain the sheer number of diverse cultures and languages found throughout the Americas, a fact that is inconsistent with the theory that a few peoples migrated from Siberia. Many Indigenous nations share the same mythology, passed on through oral tradition from generation to generation. According to the Wendat and Mohawk, for example, the first inhabitants of Canada arrived on Turtle Island either from the sky or from a cavern.

Indigenous peoples' ways of life were conceived and adapted based on the land and the seasons. For example, peoples living in the north, where there is little plant life, subsisted primarily on hunting and fishing. They wandered inland to hunt for game and lived in small, semi-nomadic clans. In contrast, peoples living in the south subsisted on agriculture (corn, squash, beans, etc.) and were semi-sedentary. They did travel to hunt, but for shorter periods of time. Clans were important for these peoples, as they were the basis for their entire social structure.

In fact, First Peoples believe that humans belonged to Earth and not the other way around, contrary to what's often expressed in the contemporary West. Respect for the land, animals and plants stem from this principle, which has been passed down for millennia.

Did you know that...

- ✓ *Cartographer Aaron Carapella of the Cherokee Nation (in the United States) developed maps showing Indigenous territories as they are thought to have been distributed around 1490, with the original names of the First Peoples?*
 - ✓ *The maps illustrate how North America was replete with Indigenous tribes, languages and cultures before 1492.*
 - ✓ *His map of Canada identifies 212 tribes with original names. In truth, a large number of autonomous groups could not be included, for lack of space on the map.*
- 

Contact

Upon contact, First Nations people were very useful to Europeans, helping them with adapting to the climate and the land, the beaver fur trade and military alliances. At the time, economic and diplomatic relations were genuine and sustained, although not without obstacles.

Incidentally, the Métis Nation can trace its origin back to the fur trade, as their ancestors came from the unions between First Nations women and European coureurs de bois and traders.

Did you know that...

- ✓ *The term “Indians” is used to refer to people from hundreds of Indigenous nations in North, Central and South America, as well as the Caribbean? The term was first used in the 15th and 16th centuries, when Christopher Columbus set out to find an alternate route to Asia. The term is seen as offensive and inaccurate, and was recently replaced with “First Nations.” However, it is still used in the Indian Act and the Canadian Constitution.*

The Royal Proclamation of 1763

Throughout the 18th and the early 19th centuries, the British government adopted **a neutral approach** for dealing with Indigenous peoples, with an aim to **keeping the peace** and facilitating relations, as Indigenous peoples were still playing a crucial role in the fur trade and were valuable in terms of military needs.

In 1760, the French colony was handed over to the British. On October 7, 1763, King George III issued the **Royal Proclamation**, which set out the constitutional framework for negotiating treaties with Indigenous peoples.

There are two major takeaways from the Proclamation:

1. Through the Proclamation, the British crown **recognized the land and title rights of Indigenous peoples**. This meant that all areas considered to be central to First Nations ways of life were to remain intact.

With a view to protecting the rights of Indigenous peoples, the Proclamation clearly stated that **Indigenous peoples owned any land that they had not ceded or sold by way of treaties**. This meant that land for colonization could only be transferred further to peaceful negotiations carried out in good faith. Additionally, any negotiations or cessions of land belonging to Indigenous peoples must be conducted between the Crown and the representative of the Indigenous people before being passed on to the colony. This arrangement ensured stability in the New World.

2. It is essential to point out, however, that King George III's Royal Proclamation declared him to be the supreme sovereign of all the land. This meant that the **Indigenous peoples' land rights were not recognized as titles**, but rather were considered to be a way to ensure peaceful relations between the First Nations and the Crown. This is a major caveat because it explains, in part, how Indigenous peoples gradually lost land rights.

The Royal Proclamation of 1763 has long been regarded by historians as the source document from which the rights of the First Nations with respect to their relationship with Canada stem; but Elders and knowledge keepers believe the Proclamation tells only the non-Indigenous people's side of the story.

Another treaty, in the form of a Wampum, complemented the Royal Proclamation. A Wampum is a hand-woven belt made of tendon and shells, often intended as a material manifestation of an agreement or understanding chosen by Indigenous peoples as part of a treaty. **The 1764 Treaty of Niagara is based on a filial relationship with the Sovereign**, who agreed to act as a good parent. Trust, respect, honesty and honour are the core principles for the relationship resulting from the Treaty. The relationship—and therefore the Treaty—must remain flexible so that the parties can renegotiate the terms, should any conflict or unforeseen events arise. **A treaty can be considered a living agreement, one that can evolve based on ever-changing circumstances.**

This example about the Royal Proclamation and the Treaty of Niagara shows that an informed reading of treaties must take into account the perspectives of both parties of the treaty.

The legacy of the Treaty of Niagara is not a written agreement but an eye-witness account of a series of discussions and debates plainly illustrating the implicit principles enclosed in a written document (the Royal Proclamation) using a Wampum belt.

Inevitably, the Treaty and the Proclamation became increasingly difficult to honour, considering the rapid expansion of the colony, which forced Indigenous populations to relocate. In addition, the end of the wars and the fur trade meant Indigenous peoples weren't as useful as they had once been to the colonies. In fact, they began to be seen as a burden on forestry operations and the resettlement of colonists, and as a source of conflict in land management efforts. This is when they became "the Indian problem."

After Confederation and the union of Upper and Lower Canada in 1867, provincial governments compelled the federal government to find a solution quickly. **The Constitution Act, 1867 unilaterally superceded the Royal Proclamation, without First Peoples having been consulted.**

Numbered treaties emerged when the western provinces joined the Confederation. Eleven such treaties were signed between 1871 and 1921, primarily on land stretching from Ontario to British Columbia and up into northern Canada.

In exchange for their lands, Indigenous bands obtained special rights from the government with respect to the land covered by the treaties, cash payments (a few dollars' worth), as well as hunting, fishing and farming equipment, and other items.

The terms of the treaties still give rise to controversy and protests. Several bands say they were duped, or that they were promised more verbally. The social and economic repercussions of numbered treaties are still felt in Indigenous communities today.

After negotiating numbered treaties and several preliminary versions along the same lines, the government of Canada implemented a law in 1876 that still governs the lives of Indigenous peoples today: the Indian Act.

Did you know that...

- ✓ ***Treaties 1 to 7, completed between 1871 and 1877, solidified Canada's claim to the lands north of the US–Canada border, enabled the construction of a national railway and opened the lands of the Northwest Territories to agricultural settlement?***
- ✓ ***Treaties 8 to 11, completed between 1899 and 1921, facilitated access to natural resources in Northern Canada, opened the West for settlement and also secured a connection between British Columbia and central Canada.***

Source: [The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

The Indian Act – 1876

*Our Indian legislation generally rests on the principle that the **Aborigines are to be kept in a condition of tutelage and treated as wards or children of the state...** It is clearly our wisdom and our duty, through education and other means, **to prepare him for a higher civilization** by encouraging him to assume the privileges and responsibilities of full citizenship.*

Annual Report of the Department of the Interior (1876)

The objectives governing this law are clear—they are intended to **civilize, protect** and **assimilate** the people referred to at the time as Indians or Savages: First Nations people.

The Canadian government of the time believed “Indians” to be **incapable of managing their affairs**. In light of this, it created reserves. First Nations peoples, most of them nomadic, were crammed and settled onto small, often isolated parcels of land, unable to carry on their traditional way of life. The Indian Act also imposed the band council political system, previously unknown to First Nations people. Through these actions and this law, the government hoped to weaken the complex political and governance systems in place and eventually eliminate them completely.

The Indian Act is a powerful tool in the hands of the federal government, because it empowers it to:

- determine who is or is not an Indian (status);
- supervise business on Indigenous land (resource development, governance); and
- control the private life and family life of every Indigenous person (band constable).

The Indian Act had a huge impact on the lives of First Nations people, especially **women**. First Nations women had always had a place in community and clan affairs, but imposed excessive paternalism forced them to take a back seat. Additionally, Canadian government band constables, who were present on all reserves, were free to grant and revoke privileges willy-nilly.

To be entitled to the same rights as Canadians—attending university, becoming a doctor or a lawyer, serving in the military or living outside a reserve—Indians were required to **give up their Indian status**. This is called “enfranchisement.” For many, enfranchisement implied renouncing their culture and language, not just for themselves, but also for their family and descendants.

In 1951, a new version of the Indian Act was written which eliminated certain religious, cultural and political restrictions deemed discriminatory. However, the Act is still paternalistic and discriminatory towards women, because **their status rights continue to flow entirely through their husbands** at every level:

- An Indian woman who married a non-Indian man lost her status. This meant she was required to leave her community and live outside the reserve.
- A non-Indian woman who married an Indian man gained status and could live on a reserve.
- An Indian woman who married an Indian man became a member of her husband’s band and was therefore no longer a member of her own band.

In June 1985, the government passed Bill C-31, which rectified the imbalance in the Indian Act and “aimed to remove discrimination from the Act, restore rights to those who had lost them and recognize First Nations control over band membership.”¹

The contemporary version of the Indian Act still governs certain aspects of Indigenous people’s lives, from reserves to financial guardianship, to the management of band resources, elections, and other aspects of life on a reserve. To this day, the Canadian government considers First Nations people as minors.

Conclusion

The Indian Act is very controversial and many people have mixed feelings about its future. While a number of people agree that it limits and controls the lives of First Nations members, abolishing it in its current form would threaten the preservation of ancestral lands and rights. Rather, we must consider a legal framework capable of ensuring that First Nations rights be respected. A fair and equitable agreement can only be reached through close collaboration between Indigenous peoples and the government.

Did you know that...

- ✓ ***The Indian Act applies only to First Nations people, not the Métis or the Inuit?***

¹ House of Commons, Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence, 1st Session, 33rd Parliament, 7 March 1985, 12:7 (Honourable David Crombie, Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development).

The residential school system

Though the Indian Act did have an impact on First Nations people, in the government's eyes, change was happening too slowly. Indians were not becoming **civilized** quickly enough. Prime Minister John A. Macdonald's solution: **kill the Indian in the child**. This unfortunate phrase aptly described the stated objective behind implementing the residential school system.

Soon after the Indian Act came into effect—in 1880—the Canadian government struck up an alliance with the Church to implement a **residential school system for Indigenous children with an aim to progressively assimilating them at a young age, as they are more malleable at that age**.

By 1920, the schools had become **mandatory for all Indigenous children aged 7 to 15**. The children were forcibly removed from their families by RCMP officers.

- In 1931, there were 80 residential schools across Canada. In total, over a 100-year period, more than 150 residential schools were operated.
- Nearly 150,000 Indigenous people have attended residential schools at some point in their lives.
- The last residential school (Gordon Indian Residential School, Saskatchewan) was shut down in 1996.
- The mortality rate for children attending residential schools ranged from 25% to 47%, depending on the school. Nearly 6,000 deaths were reported, but actual deaths have been estimated to be five to seven times this amount.

Film dealing with the issues discussed above:

[Uprooted Generation \(L'enfance déracinée\)](#)

(See the film sheet.)

Numerous **negative consequences** resulted from the residential school system. Seemingly overnight, villages in societies where every individual had a place and a role to play were **purged of their children**. For the children who left their communities, a whole new way of life was about to begin. The clergy's first measure was to **sever all ties with the children's Indigenous culture (clothing, hair, etc.)**.

The consequences have impacted them...

- **psychologically** (abuse, violence and the questioning of identity);
- **physically** (illnesses such as tuberculosis were rampant, mistreatment and sexual abuse);
- **culturally** (loss of culture and language, forced to practise a new religion, embrace different values and see the world differently);
- **socially** (shame, loss of identity, loss of the sense of belonging, decimated communities due to the lack of children and altered way of life); and
- **multigenerationally** (studies have shown that three generations are necessary to mitigate the after-effects of the residential school system).

Did you know that...

- ✓ *The Mohawk Institute, in Brantford, Upper Canada, was the first residential school, opening in 1831? Though it was first attended only by boys, girls were admitted as of 1834. It remained open until 1970, making it the longest-running residential school in Canada.*
- ✓ *For important dates during the residential school era, [click here](#).*
- ✓ *A list of 139 residential schools can be found [here](#).*



Worldview


Values

Every Indigenous group, nation and community has its own history, culture, traditions and knowledge. Still, certain values are common to many, such as **respect for Mother Earth** and her components.

Indigenous peoples' worldview is primarily based in land. Living in harmony with the land and respecting the inhabitants of a nurturing Mother Earth—animals, plants, aquatic life—are what defines their way of life and fosters group survival.

Respect for the land is a value that is **passed on from generation to generation** through language, ceremonies, protocol, stories, tradition and accounts. Peoples use stories, legends, tales and creation myths to transmit their values and forge identities. The significance of the elements, earth-related values, respect for nature and the environment have been passed down throughout the ages through oral tradition. Animals are used to convey human emotions and values, making them easier to understand and teach. Through them, children learn important notions about culture, values and the history of their peoples. For example, for a number of First Nations such as the Wendat, the Anishinaabeg (Algonquin) and the Mohawk, the turtle embodies Mother Earth in creation myths.

Learn more about Indigenous creation myths

- ✓ Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk): [Sky Woman](#)
 - ✓ Huron-Wendat: [Sky Woman](#)
 - ✓ Anishinaabe (Algonquin): [Mikinàk \(The Great Turtle\)](#)
 - ✓ Mi'gmaq: Kisúlk ([The Giver of Life](#))
 - ✓ Haida: [The Raven and the First Men](#)
- 

Film dealing with the issues discussed above:

- ✓ [The King of the Birds \(Le roi des oiseaux\)](#)

(See the film sheet.)



Living one's culture

The arrival of Europeans on the American continent had a profound impact on the First Peoples who populated the territory. With time, Indigenous land was reduced, limiting Indigenous peoples' ability to maintain their traditional ways of life, living in harmony with nature.

Growing numbers of colonists quietly appropriated the land and its resources, which constrained Indigenous peoples to find alternative livelihoods, change their ways of life and even give up their ancestral lands.

Settler colonialism is based on the idea of terra nullius, i.e., land deemed to be unoccupied or inhabited by uncivilized societies that is therefore available for colonization and development.

With colonists having progressively assimilated Indigenous peoples into the western way of life and settled on their lands, Indigenous knowledge about the land declined and some of it was lost. Certain Indigenous languages that were thriving just a few hundred years ago have disappeared entirely, taking with them a wealth of knowledge and worldviews.

Nevertheless, the resilience and the strength of Indigenous communities as well as their ability to adapt to change have contributed to their survival across Canada. Nowadays, many communities are attempting to reconnect with their ancestral knowledge in order to salvage it, revitalize it and pass it on to new generations. Perhaps this is also a way to heal from deep wounds.

In the past, culture was communicated through the teachings of Elders, who traditionally handed down their knowledge to younger generations. Today, however, any and all available means are used, though Elders remain an invaluable resource.

In light of this, several initiatives have taken shape in recent years with an aim to offer support and resources to community members, enabling them to learn and preserve Indigenous languages and traditions. One such organization is [the Institut Tshakapesh](#), which endeavours to foster success by providing Quebec Innu communities with quality services with respect to language, culture and education. [The Virtual Museum of Métis History and Culture](#) is also doing great work. Other local initiatives are encouraging the transmission of knowledge between youth and Elders through camps on Indigenous land, language classes in Indigenous schools, creative workshops and Inuit art galleries, and more.

Film dealing with the issues discussed above:

[*Auntie's hands \(Les mains de ma tante\)*](#)

(See the film sheet.)



Cultural borrowing or cultural appropriation?

Historically, governments have sought to **civilize** Indians, imposing the Indian Act and the residential school system, but Indigenous peoples have always recognized the importance of their cultures and everything they consist of—languages, use of the land, knowledge and know-how, etc.

Though cultural borrowing and exchanges between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples have occurred since first contact—consider non-Indigenous people using canoes and snowshoes, or Indigenous people using European tools—cultural appropriation is an entirely different matter.

The term “cultural appropriation” was coined in United States in 1970s to refer to the adoption or use of the customs, practices, ideas, etc. of a minority culture by members of a typically more dominant culture. Cultural appropriation can take on many forms, but arts and fashion are undoubtedly more targeted. Borrowing veers into appropriation when it is insensitive or ill-intentioned, or when it is done without consulting or engaging with the communities concerned. The same applies when borrowings or their significance is altered in such a way that does not respect the original intent.

The use of medicinal plants is an interesting example of cultural borrowing deviating into cultural appropriation. When Europeans arrived, Indigenous peoples shared their knowledge of medicinal plants with the first explorers, notably to help them fight off scurvy.

With time, this knowledge was used and modified, and enabled large pharmaceutical companies to make a fortune, without any recognition or compensation going to the Indigenous communities from whence it came.

The debate around cultural appropriation is topical. Across Canada, North America and throughout the world, traditional Indigenous objects, symbols and concepts are being reproduced without respecting the knowledge of their usages, their historical contexts or their spiritual or cultural significance.

This does not mean that purchasing Indigenous fashion items or art is wrong; rather, it should be done respectfully. Being sensitive to the significance of an object or a symbol in order to avoid adulterating it is crucial. So is buying authentic items from Indigenous people themselves, instead of buying imitations made in China, for example. Respectful cultural exchanges can be beneficial to all parties and attest one’s true appreciation of and openness to other cultures.

Film dealing with the issues discussed above:

[Ulu](#)

(See the film sheet.)

Gender identity

The Indigenous peoples are made up of many different nations, communities and families and individuals. As in non-Indigenous cultures, certain people have unique characteristics—they are great hockey players, science whizzes, skilled hunters, caretakers, some have one leg shorter than the other, some are hard of hearing or identify differently in terms of spirituality or gender.

The term “two-spirit” (a translation of the Anishinabeg “niizh manidoow”) was popularized in the 1990s by a Manitoba-based Indigenous LGBT group led by activist Albert McLeod. Research carried out by the group revealed that their Indigenous culture, which is comprised of hundreds of sub-cultures, already had LGBT terminology. Each culture had its own interpretations, which had been lost due to Christianity, the Church and residential schools. Rather than attempt to revive all the terms, they created the term “two-spirit,” which is intended to be a blanket term used to describe an Indigenous person who is part of the LGBT community.

Traditionally, many Indigenous cultures used variations on the term “spiritual” to refer to people with both female and male spirits.

Indigenous languages have words for sexuality and gender. Cree, for example, uses “napêw iskwêwisêhot” to refer to a man who dresses like a woman, and “inahpîkasoht” to refer to a woman who dresses and lives as a man. The Inuit have a third gender, “Sipiniq.”

One of the primary aspects of the two-spirit movement is that it signals a return to a traditional Indigenous culture that **acknowledges genders beyond the binary.**

The term “Two-spirit” refers to all of the following:

Lesbian
Gay
Bisexual
Trans
Queer
Intersex
2S two-spirit

According to a health survey of First Nations people in the Atlantic Provinces, 3% of Indigenous people identify as two-spirit.

“Long ago, we would let children play and see if they were more masculine or feminine. Two-spirit people were given recognition equal to shaman,” says Tatum Crane, a two-spirit Algonquin woman.

Even if the situation has improved today, two-spirit people acknowledge that it is still not smooth sailing for them. More education is needed on the topic, which is still taboo in many communities.

Film dealing with the issues discussed above:

[The Hearing \(Entendre\)](#)

(See the film sheet.)

Between two worlds

The ways of life within Indigenous communities changed very quickly due to the creation of the reserve system, loss of land, cultural integration to the dominant society, the introduction of the Indian Act and the implementation of the residential school system. The changes brought about the loss of a certain identity and a part of traditional culture. The intergenerational trauma and scars they left have had far-reaching consequences in many communities, where social inequality with Canadians is rampant, in particular with regard to education, health, employment, housing and poverty.

The discrepancies between Indigenous realities and non-Indigenous realities are real, and they are easily explained. It is everyone's responsibility to educate themselves about the colonial history that has impacted Indigenous peoples in Canada (and in any other country with similar realities), thereby helping tear down the prejudice and systemic racism Indigenous people face today.

As a way to improve their well-being, many communities and individuals have chosen healing. "Healing" is a term we have heard a fair bit since the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada was published in 2015. The notion stems from the practice of traditional culture and means different things to different people. Some people say comfort can be found in traditional spirituality, in the practice of traditional activities or in the reappropriation of one's culture.

Healing is a commitment, an active process that requires personal effort, constant investment and determination.

Indigenous medicine is sometimes referred to as the Red Road, the Sweetgrass Trail, the Way of the pipe (Waldrum, 1997), or the Road to Wellness.

Regardless of the path a person chooses, they will undoubtedly be met with many challenges, perils and setbacks on their healing journey, as it is a continuous process of self-transformation that brings people to grieve for past sorrows and accept them in order to move on.

Many people have felt the benefits of returning to their roots, reacquainting themselves with healthier habits and reclaiming their identity and their culture.

Film dealing with the issues discussed above:

[ZUYA \(The Journey\)](#)

(See the film sheet.)

Have you heard of...

The medicine wheel?

Medicine wheels can be found in several Indigenous nations. They are divided into four quadrants and carry different meanings. The number four is sacred to many North American Indigenous peoples. It can represent the interconnectedness of all life forms, the various cycles of nature and the circular nature of life, but it can also symbolize:

- ✓ *the four seasons;*
- ✓ *the four components of a person (physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual);*
- ✓ *the four realms (animal, mineral, plant and human); or*
- ✓ *the four sacred medicines (sweetgrass, tobacco, cedar and sage).*

This is how the medicine wheel (a circle) came to represent the harmony and balance that exist in our environment and that we should aspire to find within ourselves.



Urban living

According to 2011 census data, **56% of Indigenous people live in cities**. While the census did confirm that Indigenous people make up the fastest growing segment of the population in Canada, it is important to understand why.

In contrast to what one might expect, the data does not point to Indigenous people moving to the cities in droves. Rather, the trend is attributable to the fact that more and more people are identifying as Indigenous on the census, thereby boosting the figures.

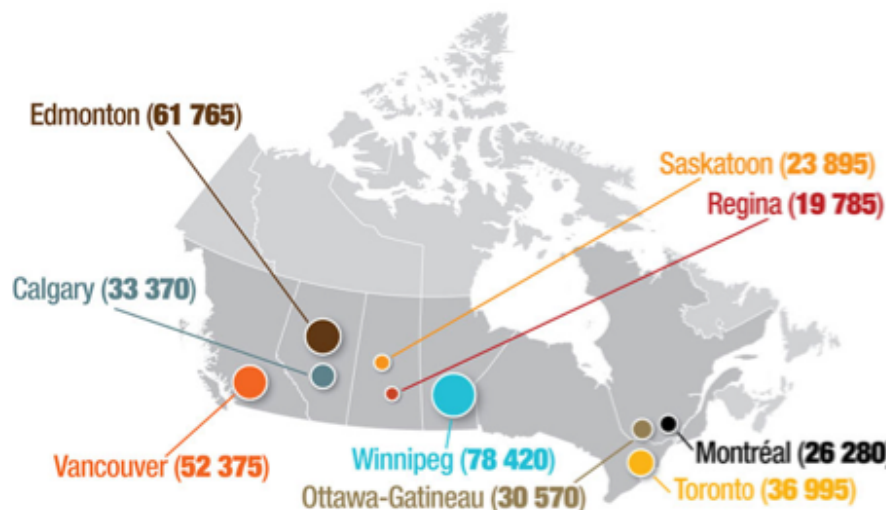
Many people who are Indigenous and who didn't identify as such on previous censuses have started to do so, undoubtedly because of reduced stigmatization.

Even so, some Indigenous people do leave their often remote communities for school or work, or simply by personal choice.

Before 1985 and Bill C-31, for an Indigenous woman, marrying a non-Indigenous man meant losing her Indian status and leaving her community to live in a city, a suburb, or the countryside—off-reserve. When Bill C-31 was enacted, the forced emancipation clauses were eliminated. Some women did return to their communities once status had been restored to them, but many remained where they were, off-reserve, because they had made a life for themselves in the cities, and had children there. This goes a way to explaining the statistic, as does the fact that subsequent bills did away with more gender- and status-based discriminatory provisions.

Among the three large groups of Indigenous people, the Métis are the most urban (62%).

Les villes ayant les plus **importantes populations autochtones en 2011** étaient :



Source: [Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada](#)

One of the issues resulting from living in a city is the preservation and practice of Indigenous customs and culture. A long way from their communities and perhaps even their families, Indigenous people in urban areas are immersed in an environment which, while not exactly hostile, defends customs and values that are vastly different from their own.

To compensate, many Indigenous people living in urban centres maintain ties with their communities and feel a deep sense of identity and belonging in relation to their culture. Living outside of their communities also triggers a will and a need to define their place in the world, their values and their future within the dominant society while holding on to their identity.

In order to preserve their culture and their identity in the cities, Indigenous people have created groups and established meeting grounds, contributing to a strengthening of their sense of identity, culture, society, economy and politics. For example, creating the **Regroupement des centres d'amitié autochtones** has provided them with the resources the Indigenous community needs to thrive in urban centres and helped raised awareness among non-Indigenous people of the various Indigenous cultures and issues faced by Indigenous people.

Have you heard of...

Indigenous friendship centres?

- ✓ *Indigenous friendship centres have been around for more than 50 years. In Canada, some 118 friendship centres provide services to urban Indigenous people. Operating under the National Association of Friendship Centres ([NAFC](#)), their mission is to promote culture and to build bridges with non-Indigenous communities. They are important learning and training centres for thousands of Indigenous people, advocating for the rights and interests of Indigenous people. Over the years, they have become spaces where urban Indigenous individuals can freely express their needs, aspirations and demands.*
- ✓ *You can find the Indigenous friendship centre nearest you on the [National Association of Friendship Centres website](#).*

Racism is another major issue that can make living in a city a burdensome life choice.

For example, Indigenous people in Regina (20%) reported in a study carried out by the Environics Institute that racism and discrimination are what they dislike the most about their city.

(Source: [Environics Institute](#), p. 38)

It would seem that racism is still an obstacle to the socio-economic integration of certain urban Indigenous people, to varying degrees, depending on the city and individual contexts. In addition to this, several studies and reports have revealed deep social and systemic inequalities. For example, in Quebec, which has seen a more recent urbanization of Indigenous people than the rest of Canada (as of the 1980s for Val-d'or, Sept-Îles and Montréal), "[t]he significant increase of the Aboriginal presence causes discomfort, uneasiness and even rejection within the general population."

(Source: [RCAAQ](#))

Though certain hardships make city life harder for Indigenous people, other more positive aspects explain why many choose the city. Very few colleges and universities are within a reasonable distance of Indigenous communities, which means many people move to the city to pursue their schooling. Employment follows a similar pattern, with jobs being rare within communities and often limited to band council positions. It is easier to find a job in the city.

A matter of perception

According to an Environics Institute study of 2,614 Indigenous people living in eleven Canadian cities, most First Nations, Métis and Inuit people believe that non-Indigenous people entertain a wide range of stereotypes and prejudices about them, most commonly dealing with excessive alcohol and drug consumption (74%). Seven out of ten report having been unjustly treated based on the fact that they are Indigenous.

(Source: [Environics Institute](#), p. 75)

But how are Indigenous people actually perceived by non-Indigenous people? The Environics Institute surveyed more than 2,501 Canadians in ten of the eleven cities where the original study had taken place.

Results showed that non-Indigenous **Canadians' first impressions of Indigenous people living in cities are generally positive**. Still, most non-Indigenous Canadians admitted to being aware that Indigenous people are discriminated against in today's Canada, regardless of which city they live in or what demographic group they belong to.

(Source: [Environics Institute](#), p. 11)

Why do discrepancies between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people persist? Though urban non-Indigenous Canadians are generally sensitive to Indigenous issues and aware of the role they have played in Canada's history, **their knowledge of the current situation of Indigenous people is limited**. What's more, **over half of non-Indigenous Canadians have either never heard of residential schools** or heard very little, despite the official apology issued by the government in 2008 and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

(Source: [Environics Institute](#), p. 11)

In light of this, it is all the more important to spread awareness about inequalities and issues but also the significance of the values, cultures and beliefs of the First Peoples, in hopes of fostering understanding, respect and the promotion of Indigenous cultures.

Film dealing with the issues discussed above:

[Healing Journey One Button at a Time \(La guérison par les boutons\)](#)

(See the film sheet.)



Land and the environment

Breaking promises

Earlier, we discussed how all the things that make up the earth—animals, plants and minerals—are respected by Indigenous cultures because they contribute to survival. Although some may consider this way of thinking to be outdated, many Indigenous people still live according to these principles as they continue to recognize the importance of Mother Earth for the present moment, as well as for the future. Deforestation, oil and mining operations, water contamination and the lack of access to clean drinking water, and other projects that put the Earth at risk for future generations are all crucial topics for First Peoples, who often are more impacted by them because they affect their way of life directly.

Though treaty and ancestral rights (including the term “aboriginal”) are protected by section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982, many Indigenous communities still have to fight for their rights before the courts.

Ancestral rights are defined as inherent, collective rights derived from ancestral occupation of land and prior social order. According to the Supreme Court, ancestral rights **are rights from customs, practices or traditions that were an inherent part of the distinctive culture of an Indigenous group at the time of contact.**

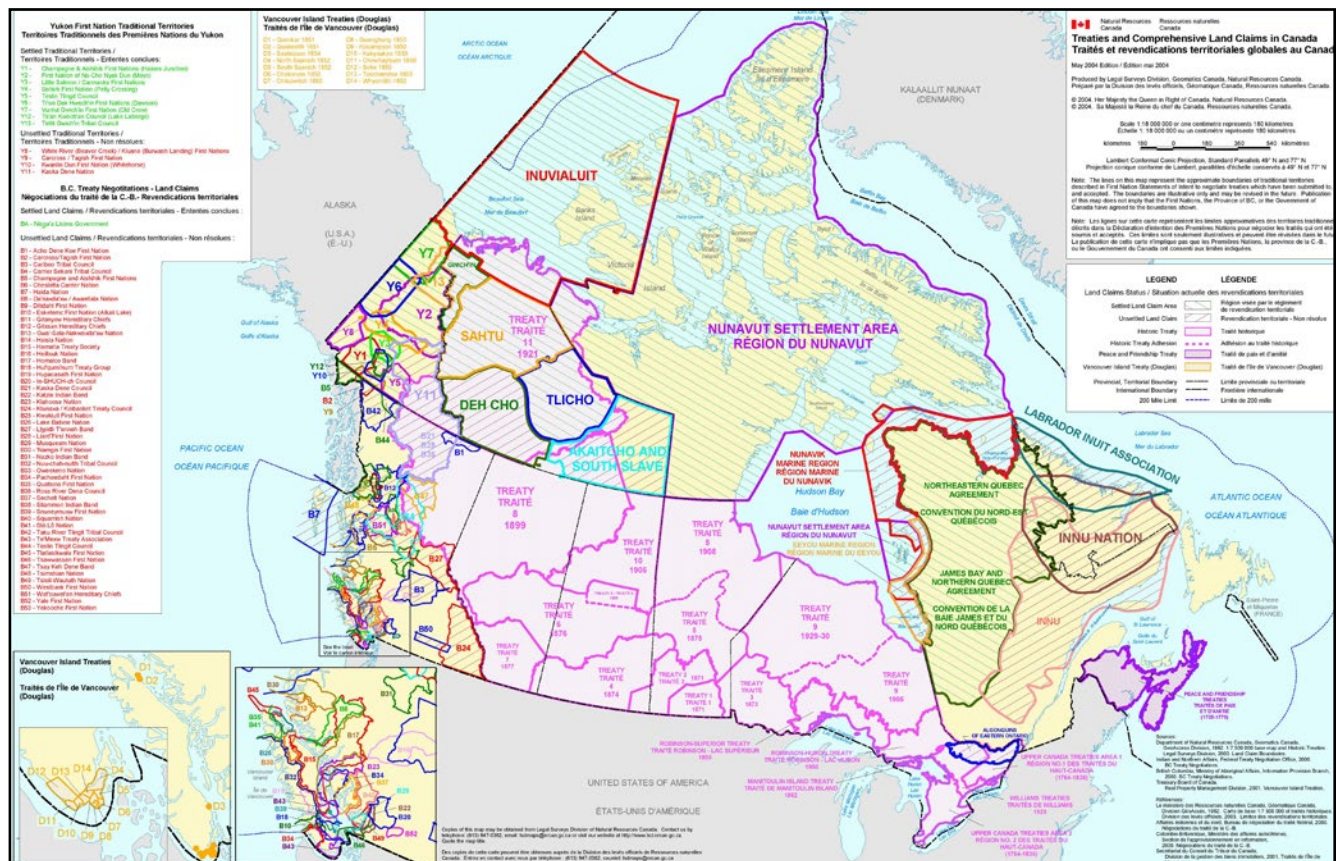
Aboriginal title is a type of ancestral right related to exclusive occupation of the land prior to the Crown’s assertion of sovereignty. It includes the right to exclusive use and occupation of the land.

For several decades now, Indigenous peoples across Canada have been demanding the land and its components be protected, and decrying land appropriation they deem to be illegal.

Modern treaties across Canada include:

- James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (1977)
- Northeastern Quebec Agreement (1978)
- Inuvialuit Final Agreement (N.W.T., 1984)
- Gwich’in Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement (N.W.T., 1992)
- Umbrella final agreement between the government of Canada, the Council for Yukon Indians and the government of the Yukon (1993)
- Agreement between the Inuit of the Nunavut Settlement Area and Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada (1993)
- Sahtu Dene and Métis Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement (N.W.T., 1994)
- Nisga’a Final Agreement Act (British Columbia, 2000)
- Tlicho Land Claims and Self-Government Agreement (N.W.T., 2005)
- Labrador Inuit Land Claims Agreement Act (N.L., 2005)
- Tsawwassen First Nation Final Agreement (British Columbia, 2009)

Map of First Peoples land claims in Canada (2010)



Source: [Natural Resources Canada](#)

The Royal Proclamation, the Constitution Act, 1982, several numbered treaties and many court decisions have strengthened First Peoples' claims. Additionally, decisions handed down by the Supreme Court of Canada and the Superior Court of Quebec require that Indigenous peoples be consulted and accommodated where projects exploiting natural resources are carried out on claimed land.

Yet, there are still hundreds of Indigenous land claims across Canada, some of which have sparked historic and emblematic political crises for Indigenous peoples: the 1995 Ipperwash Crisis, the conflict involving the James Bay Cree, the Naskapi and the Inuit of northern Quebec in the 1970s or, more recently, the Trans Mountain and Energy East pipeline projects.

Have you heard of...

The Oka Creesis?

In 1990, in the midst of the Oka Creesis, relations between the governments and Indigenous nations were very tense. It started in March 1989, when Oka mayor Jean Ouellette announced his intention to increase the size of his city's golf course and to start the construction of condominiums. The land used for the golf course is an ancestral Indigenous cemetery, and the condominiums would be built on land claimed by the Mohawk of Kanesatake, a neighbouring community.

The following March, traditionalist Mohawk families set up camp on the small dirt road leading to the Mohawk cemetery to stop work on the golf course from going ahead. Tensions grew between protesters and the authorities.

On July 11, 1990, 100 Sûreté du Québec (SQ) officers stepped in, launching an assault on the camp. Corporal Marcel Lemay met his death in the ensuing gun battle, and police retreated. The Mohawk then built a barricade on road 344. Kahnawake, a Mohawk community about 45 minutes east of Kanesatake, showed support by blocking the Mercier bridge.

The stand-off lasted 78 days and was closely followed not only by Quebec and Canadian media but by people all over the world. The Oka Creesis became the emblem of the difficult and tense relations between the governments and the First Peoples in Canada and Quebec.

To find out more, [click here](#).

Have you heard of environmental racism?

Environmental racism is a systemic form of racism in which toxic wastes are introduced into or near marginalized communities. People of colour, Indigenous peoples, working class and poor people suffer disproportionately from environmental hazards and risks such as industrial toxins, polluted air, unclean water, deleterious work conditions and the location of dangerous, toxic facilities, such as incinerators and toxic waste dumps. The pollution of lands, air and waterways often causes chronic illness to the inhabitants and changes in their lifestyle.

Source: [Canadian Race Relations Foundation](#)

Did you know that...

Health Canada data from 2017 shows that 152 drinking water advisories are in effect in 104 Indigenous communities across Canada?

Source: [Radio-Canada](#)

Film dealing with the issues discussed above:

[Nuhe nenë boghílníh \(Protecting Our Homeland\)](#)

(See the film sheet.)

Sustainable development

*“The Earth does not belong to mankind; it is man who belongs to the Earth. **We know:** All things are connected. Everything that happens to the Earth befalls the son of the Earth.” — Squamish Chief*

Indigenous peoples are among the first to suffer the consequences of climate change due to their dependence on resources and the land. The slightest variations in climate can have dire consequences on Indigenous communities' ways of life. Climate change can even threaten and endanger the survival of these communities and their special relationship with the land.

A 2013 study on the impact of climate change carried out by the First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Sustainable Development Institute in nine Indigenous communities revealed that:

- bodies of water are frozen over for shorter periods of time;
- traditional winter routes must be rethought because those over waterways are more dangerous due to a thinner ice cover;
- hunters and trappers have noted game migration leading to new species treading their lands;
- winters are shorter;
- less snow than before; and
- small fruit are of an inferior quality and lesser in quantity.

Moreover, rising water levels resulting from melting glaciers is leading to the erosion of shores in the North and on the coasts, especially on Inuit territory, thereby threatening land, sea life and an entire ecosystem on which today's Inuit still largely depended.

As early as the 19th century, Sioux Chief Sitting Bull was quoted as saying, “Only when the last tree is cut, the last river poisoned and the last fish dead will the white man understand that he cannot eat money.”

Many generations of young Indigenous people have been concerned by climate change and its impact, along with Elders who have witnessed the changes over their long lives.

Though development is important, it is even more important that development be respectful and sustainable. This can be ensured by reducing its environmental impact and reusing and recycling the waste it produces, and by maximizing self-sufficiency. Adopting a more traditional way of life is a step in the right direction.

Films dealing with the issues discussed above:

[*Onickakw \(Wake Up!\)*](#)

(See the film sheet.)

[*The Three Sisters Community Garden \(Le jardin communautaire des trois sœurs\)*](#)

(See the film sheet.)



The right to equality

Colonialism has had a profound impact on the socio-economic aspect of First Peoples' lives. Still today, indicators show a **discrepancy between the living standards of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people**. Whether it be health, education, employment, income or other factors, Indigenous peoples in Canada are behind the curve in comparison with the general population. In fact, some Indigenous people are living in conditions equivalent to those in developing countries.


It is a fact that Indigenous people generally have lower incomes, a rate of diabetes almost three times that of the non-Indigenous population, a higher chance of ending up in prison, a shorter life expectancy and lower graduation rates than non-Indigenous people. These are a result of the Indian Act, paternalism, the residential school system, the reserve system, the loss of land, cultural assimilation and a host of other factors. Nevertheless, prejudice, stereotypes and racism born of ignorance are still rampant across Canada.

As a result, several Indigenous citizen groups have been formed in the last decade to raise awareness of these situations, to assert their rights and to make their voices heard. This approach seeks to unite nations across Canada and demonstrate the resilience of Indigenous peoples, with hopes of inciting the government to contribute to the edification of a more fair, equitable and safe future for all Canadians. Often, one of the primary goals of these organizations is the denunciation of **systemic racism** against First Peoples and the impact it can have on their lives.

The [Barreau du Québec](#) [Quebec Bar Association] defines systemic racism as “a social production of inequality based on race in decisions about people and in the treatment they receive. Racial inequality is the result of the organization of a society's economic, cultural and political life.”

Did you know that...

Although Canada is among the highest ranked countries on the United Nations' Human Development Index, if we isolate the data for Indigenous peoples in Canada, they are ranked 60th, along with the world's poorest countries?



United Nations report

The Universal Periodic Review (UPR) is a peer-review process before the United Nations Human Rights Council. Under the UPR, the human rights record of each country is reviewed by other United Nations Member States. This provides an opportunity for countries to discuss their domestic human rights framework and the measures taken to promote and protect human rights in their country.

The UPRs conducted on Canada in 2008 and 2013 both condemned the alarming living conditions of Indigenous peoples in Canada and decried the fact that they continue to live in **conditions that are significantly inferior to that of non-Indigenous people.**

In May 2018, Canada's human rights record was again scrutinized by the United Nations Human Rights Council as part of the Member States UPR. In its report, the UN deplored that despite the government's promises and efforts in making amends for historical wrongs and in lifting Indigenous populations out of extreme poverty, Canada had again failed in its duty. Marie-Claude Landry, Chief Commissioner of the Canadian Human Rights Commission, lamented the fact that the Canadian government had failed "millions of Canadians by denying them an equal chance to succeed and thrive."

This means the Canadian government will have to redouble its efforts and make good on its promises and oft-repeated pledges to improve conditions in Indigenous communities and, by the same token, close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in terms of living conditions.

The status of women and women's rights

While all Indigenous people have suffered the effects of colonialism and its inherent systemic racism to varying degrees, Indigenous women have been doubly disadvantaged by racism and sexism. The Indian Act and the ensuing paternalism have had a tremendous impact on Indigenous women in Canada. Indigenous women, who traditionally were involved in community and clan affairs, were gradually silenced and denied any input in their band's decisions. The band council system, the loss of status resulting from marrying a non-Indigenous man as well as the loss of their children to residential schools all led to the erosion of their role within society.

In the early 1980s, Indigenous women united to denounce the injustices they suffered when marrying non-Indigenous men, losing their status and being forced out of their communities. Bill C-31 (An Act to Amend the Indian Act) was adopted in 1985. So were the first Indigenous women's associations in Canada and several provinces. They studied the experience of women. They shared, they gathered. They wanted to be heard and to have their say in the decisions that concerned Indigenous women, thereby contributing to the improvement of living conditions. The Indian Act was amended two more times (by Bill C-3 in 2010 and by Bill S-3 in 2017) in order to do away with any remaining discriminatory provisions perpetuating the century-long loss of status endured by Indigenous women.

Today, 87 of the 633 Indigenous chiefs are women and nearly 40% of councillors are women.

Missing and murdered Indigenous women

In 2016, the federal government launched the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls in response to calls from numerous Indigenous families and leaders to look into the matter. The Inquiry focussed on bringing to light the causes behind the violence against, and the murders and disappearances of Indigenous women in Canada with a view to formulating effective recommendations to enhance and ensure the safety of Indigenous women and girls.

The statistics speak volumes:

- According to the RCMP, 1,181 Indigenous women and girls (164 disappearances and 1,017 homicides) have been murdered in the last few decades. But numbers collated by Indigenous women's organizations in Canada suggest more than 3,000 women have been murdered.
- According to the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC):
 - 67% are murders (death by homicide or due to negligence);
 - 20% are disappearances;
 - 4% are suspicious deaths (death considered natural or accidental by police but suspicious by members of the person's family or community); and
 - 9% are uncategorized.
- Nearly half of the murder cases in the NWAC database are unsolved.

Initiatives and solidarity

Since 1991, February 14 is a day of gatherings and demonstrations to raise awareness both in Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities about the violence inflicted on Indigenous women. It is also an opportunity to pay tribute to missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. These peaceful demonstrations can take on different forms, such as lunches, flash mobs, conferences, marches, etc.

Additionally, the REDress Project, which went viral across Canada after it took root in Saskatchewan in 2015, consists in hanging red dresses in trees as a visual reminder of the spirit of these women, the importance of shedding light on the causes behind the disappearance and murder of Indigenous women and the search for solutions to eradicate these tragedies.

By combining citizens' initiatives with the National Inquiry, we are ensuring that the injustices perpetrated against scores of Indigenous women are condemned, sensitizing people to this reality, jumpstarting a collective reflection on solutions for the future and, above all, honouring the memory of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls.

Film dealing with the issues discussed above:

[Heels to Heal \(En talons pour la cause\)](#)

(See the film sheet.)

Did you know that...

- ✓ *Indigenous women between 25 and 44 are five times more likely to die a violent death than other Canadian women?*
- ✓ *In Canada, Indigenous women account for:*
 - *16% of all murdered women; and*
 - *11% of all missing women.*

Yet they account for only 4% of Canada's total female population.

The revitalization and recognition of Indigenous languages

Indigenous languages are more than mere means of communication—their structures and lexicons encompass an entire worldview, giving a unique view of peoples' philosophies and age-old traditions.

Indigenous languages around the world

Indigenous peoples make up 6% of the total world population. But out of the roughly 6,700 languages spoken worldwide, more than 4,000 of them are Indigenous languages.

Conservative estimates predict that more than half of all currently spoken languages will have disappeared by 2100. Other estimates foresee the demise of up to 95% of languages by the end of this century. Most endangered languages are Indigenous, generally spoken by very small numbers of people. It is estimated that one Indigenous language dies out every two weeks.

Indigenous languages in Canada

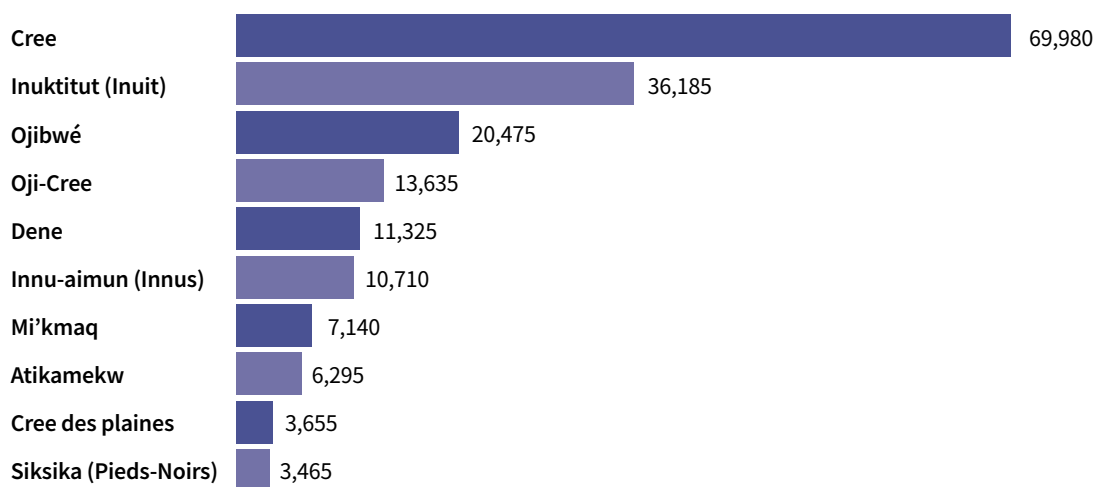
In Canada, where some fifty Indigenous languages—and many more dialects—are spoken, the most widespread Indigenous languages are Cree, Inuktitut and Ojibwe. In 2018, Canadian Heritage estimated that only one out of twenty Indigenous people speaks the tongue of their people.

A study published at the beginning of the aughts by the Department of Indian Affairs predicted that if nothing was done, Cree, Inuktitut and Ojibwe would be the only Indigenous languages still spoken in Canada in 50 years. Thankfully, these numbers have been revised, but that does not mean that many Indigenous languages are not still losing ground. In some

families and communities, a language can die out in as little as two generations. Many factors are at the root of this decline in the number of speakers: globalization, the lack of funding for teaching the languages and producing the necessary materials, cultural assimilation, younger generations' need to speak either English or French, the legacy of residential schools, where children were forbidden from speaking their mother tongue, and more.

To stymie this decline and prevent the loss of all the knowledge contained in Indigenous languages, several nations and communities have set up various initiatives intended to strengthen the status of their language. While some communities have chosen to teach the regular curriculum in their Indigenous mother tongue from kindergarten to Grade 3 or Grade 6, others have opted to dispense languages classes in addition to the regular curriculum. Some communities in which the language had effectively disappeared have opted to rebuild and normalize their languages using old glossaries, dictionaries and sister languages, and then teach it to adults and elementary and high school students. Still others give language classes to band council employees and write plays or songs in their native tongues. Any and all means are used in the preservation of language, as it is an important issue for First Peoples.

10 most widespread Indigenous mother tongues in Canada (2016)



Source : [Radio-Canada](#)

Language is often a culture's primary representative and the sole witness to a people's entire history. The recognition of Indigenous languages, which carry the knowledge of millennia, is crucial to Indigenous peoples, especially from a reconciliation perspective. Were they to be recognized by the Canadian government, it would bode well for all Indigenous Peoples in Canada, serving as a show of good faith. Though it could never rectify all the wrongs inflicted by decades of colonialism, but it would no doubt be seen as a good omen, a promise of better relations in the future and a recognition of the contribution of Indigenous cultures to Canada's history.

Did you know that...

- ✓ *There are more than 50 different Inuktitut words to describe snow.*

Film dealing with the issues discussed above:

[Ute Kanata \(Here in Canada\)](#)

(See the film sheet.)

Statistics

- ✓ 1 out of 10 Indigenous children speaks an Indigenous language as a mother tongue.
- ✓ The total number of speakers of Indigenous languages has increased by 3.1% in the last ten years.
- ✓ In 2016, approximately 260,550 people spoke their Indigenous language.

Source: [CCUNESCO information sheet prepared with Dr. Onowa McIvor](#)



Improved coexistence

For some years now, beginning with the Canadian government's apology for having forced First Nations children into the residential school system and the ensuing Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the word "reconciliation" has been on everybody's lips when it comes to talking about the relationships between Indigenous Peoples and Canadians.

But the word isn't trivial; on the contrary, it is loaded with meaning. While many understand the importance of building bridges, it is also important for Indigenous Peoples to be able to cross these bridges in both directions. What does reconciliation mean? For some, the word means the end of colonialism and the beginning of a more equitable era for Indigenous Peoples. But this involves a form of decolonization—a fundamental step for improved relations—which cannot be achieved in a vacuum. Indigenous Peoples must reclaim their cultures, their ways of doing things, their heritage, and this cannot be done in today's Canada without the governments and society at large being open to this type of change and to the reappropriation of a strong Indigenous identity.

While many Canadians would like to reach out, a lot of them are still wondering what tangible, everyday actions they can undertake to foster better relations and ensure a better future for the First Peoples. One of these is educating oneself on the history, issues and realities of Indigenous Peoples. In doing so, Canadians will be better equipped to understand the reasons behind the disadvantages, the needs and the claims of the First Peoples.

Canada's cultural diversity is a treasure whose value comes from the origins, the history, the cultures and the languages that shape it. The First Peoples contributed—and still contribute every day—to Canada's riches in a way that is undeniable. Now, together, we must coexist in better ways and put words into action in terms of improving the living standards of First Peoples, recognizing their cultures and their languages, fostering openness to new concepts and new and true nation-to-nation relations. The key to living together better is valuing Indigenous cultures, knowledge and know-how. Let's get to work!

Conclusion

This teaching guide is an introduction to Indigenous cultures and realities in Canada. It is but an overview of the diversity of cultures, opinions and expressions across Canada.

Though some of the topics addressed in the guide and the films may represent several Indigenous nations and communities, it is important to remember that First Peoples are made up of a wide range of cultures and that each community has its own distinct identity and culture. We hope that this guide helps introduce certain Indigenous themes and topics in schools and initiate discussions and reflections with students.

Though general terms and the term “Indigenous” are used herein to introduce certain basic notions, they do not do justice to the diversity of peoples and nations. This is why we encourage you to expand your research and further your knowledge after reading this guide and viewing the suggested films. The road to true reconciliation will be long and will require involvement and collaboration from future generations. It will also require education, understanding and raising awareness. With these, we hope we can work together toward mutual respect and equal rights for everyone.

Which Indigenous communities are located in your area? Do you know their histories, their languages, their land and their traditions? Get to know the members of those communities and find interests and passions you have in common.

Small, simple gestures in your everyday life can improve relations and promote dialogue, thereby fighting prejudice and stereotypes.

Discuss the topics covered in this guide or in the news with your friends and family. Integrate the Indigenous perspective into your own—try to think about a given situation while considering both sides of the issue. Above all, take the time to educate yourself.

There are many Indigenous resources enabling anyone to learn more, offering a fresh take on Canada’s history and dispelling erroneous or incomplete information.

For example, you can find out about [150 Acts of Reconciliation for the Last 150 Days of Canada’s 150](#), written by Crystal Fraser, a PhD student in history at the University of Alberta, Gwichya Gwich’in from Inuvik, Dachan Choo Gèhñjik from the Northwest Territories, and Sara Komarnisky, an anthropologist, a post-doctoral researcher in history at the University of Alberta and a descendant of Ukrainian settlers.

By highlighting the diversity of peoples and nations, we can discover the beauty in every culture, proudly celebrate and perpetuate traditions and customs, and observe the strength and resilience of our peoples. We can recognize the importance of every one of them throughout Canada’s history and the place future generations will occupy in tomorrow’s Canada.

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We would love to get your comments and suggestions.
Help us improve this guide—email us at guide.info@wapikoni.ca.

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