

Traditional Lands versus Reserves

By: Abby Keirstead and Summer Arsenault

The difference between traditional lands and reserves is rooted in the history of colonization in Canada.

Traditional lands are the territories that Indigenous peoples have lived on and cared for generations, while reserves are lands that were set aside by the Canadian government exclusively for First Nations peoples to live on under the Indian Act.



Land Acknowledgment

The land acknowledgments we hear today are based on an old tradition or protocol carried out by Indigenous communities in Canada.

The land on which we gather is the traditional territory of the Wolastoqiyik, Wəlastəkewiyik / Maliseet whose ancestors along with the Mi'kmaq / Mi'kmaw and Passamaquoddy / Peskotomuhkati Tribes / Nations signed Peace and Friendship Treaties with the British Crown in the 1700s. (St. Thomas University Land Acknowledgment.)

Why should we understand the difference?

Traditional land is a source of identity for Indigenous.

By understanding the difference, we recognize the historical and ongoing impacts of colonization on Indigenous peoples and how we can better understand the complex relationship between Indigenous Peoples and the Canadian government – working towards reconciliation and decolonization.

The Indian Act governs all reserves in Canada. The Act outlines that First Nations peoples cannot own title to land on reserve, and the Crown can use reserve land for any reason.



Land Claims and Modern Treaties:

As a result of the Indian Act rules, the size of the reserve lands of many First Nations decreased significantly and many First Nations were forced to relocate their reserve lands to more isolated districts.

In 1991, the federal government established the Indian Claims Commission to address numerous land claims. Many of these claims have been settled to the benefit of the First Nations, and the funds have been used in some cases to purchase lands and expand reserves.

Understanding land claims when learning about traditional lands and reserves is essential because land claims allow Indigenous Peoples to establish their land and resources. Modern treaties and land claims redress historical wrongs, promoting Indigenous self-government, and fostering economic growth.

Myths vs Facts on traditional lands versus Reserves

Myth: Reserves are self-governing communities.

Fact: Reserves are governed by the Indian Act, a federal law that was created in 1876 to control Indigenous peoples.

Myth: Indigenous peoples have no connection to their traditional lands.

Fact: Traditional lands are deeply connected to their culture, language, and identities, as Indigenous peoples have lived and cared for their lands for generations.

Myth: Indigenous communities freely gave up their traditional lands to the government for the creation of reserves.

Fact: The establishment of reserves was often a result of forced displacement and dispossession of Indigenous lands through colonial policies, treaties, and other mechanisms. Indigenous communities did not willingly surrender their traditional lands but were often coerced or faced significant pressure to do so.

What can you do?

Understanding the historical context of Indigenous relations with each other, the land's natural world, and newcomers to the land is an important part of reconciliation. Seeking further education and insights is the responsible first step to take.



References

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