

User Guide: Treaties

What

This Plain Talk discusses the kinds of agreements that were made between the colonial powers (mainly English and French) and First Nations, and presents a brief overview of the challenges, realities, and disappointments.

Why

“You say that you are our Father and I am your son. We say, We will not be like Father and Son, but like Brothers. This wampum belt confirms our words. These two rows will symbolize two paths or two vessels, traveling down the same river together. One, a birch bark canoe, will be for the onkwehón:we, their laws, their customs and their ways. The other, a ship, will be for the white people and their laws, their customs and their ways. We shall each travel the river together, side by side, but in our boat. Neither of us will make compulsory laws or interfere in the internal affairs of the other. Neither of us will try to steer the other’s vessel.

As long as the Sun shines upon this Earth, that is how long OUR Agreement will stand; Second, as long as the Water still flows; and Third, as long as the Grass Grows Green at a certain time of the year. Now we have Symbolized this Agreement and it shall be binding forever as long as Mother Earth is still in motion.”

Rotinoshón:ni-Dutch, Two Row Wampum Treaty of 1613

Before colonization First Nations lived independently as Nations. The Europeans who discovered what we now know as North America encountered independent, distinct, self-governing and self-sufficient societies. Treaties are broadly recognized throughout the world as valid international agreements amongst sovereign nations. The very fact that Treaties were concluded with these nations confirms that they were sovereign peoples.

Treaties frequently have to do with sovereignty, land, and control. Treaties continue to affect relationships between First Nations and federal, provincial, territorial and municipal governments. In theory, a treaty is a mutual

agreement between two nations. In practice, there was nothing mutual about the treaties authorizing land cessions.

First Nations signed over 300 treaties with Europeans during the 1700's and 1800's, and are sometimes referred to as treaty people. The treaties agreed to share the land and resources.

How

- Discuss the idea that European explorers discovered this new land. It certainly wasn't an idea shared by the peoples who occupied the land, though this is the way it has been reflected in the history books.
- What does it mean to say your word is your bond? Discuss how a contract, or a treaty, is only as good as the honour of the persons signing it.
- Discuss some of the issues with Indian treaties. Were they doomed from the start because Europeans did not believe that "your word is your bond"?
- Write a story or a poem about a promise made and broken.
- First Nations people believe in sharing land and resources. Europeans believe in control and ownership. How can these points of view be reconciled? Is it possible to share land and resources or must one side own and control?
- Do you agree that Europeans viewed First Nations cultures and spiritual beliefs as inferior and unequal? Why would they think that?
- Why were these treaties signed?