The Land: Part Three

The Work Part

**“Knowledge” questions:** These are the kinds of questions you’ll find right there in the reading. They’re easy to answer and none of you should have any trouble at all with them.

**“Thinking” questions:** Also known as, “the questions some of you will be tempted to skip because the answers must be inferred by reading between the lines and doing some thinking of your own.”

**Knowledge**

* Before the French and English settled in what is now called Canada, where did Aboriginals live and what did they do there?
* Where, specifically did the Inuit live?
* When did European settlers really start to move in on the First Nations’ land base?
* What factors “hastened the process of land loss?”
* Why were the Chemawawin Moose Lake, and Opaskawayak First Nations forced to move?
* What are some effects of forced relocation?
* Define “reciprocity.”
* How many Aboriginals are living “off-reserve” these days?
* Name at least two ways in which urbanization might erode an Aboriginal’s sense of identity.

**Thinking**

* Why do you suppose Aboriginal peoples occupied so much space?
* Why didn’t European settlers settle Inuit land at the same time as the they did the First Nations’?
* Name a year in the 19th century. Any year.
* You’ve read a bit about treaties; what kinds of problems did they present?
* What do you suppose is meant by “a social catastrophe?” Why would a loss of self-sufficiency cause it? Is an award of $13 million dollars a logical solution to the problem?
* Why is reciprocity important and why would it have broken down because of forced relocation?
* Imagine one Aboriginal making the decision to move to a city. Now, briefly describe how his/her life would unfold over the next ten years or so.

Aboriginal Land Base

*Well, it’s hard to be traditional*

*When you’re living right downtown*

*People tend to look at you funny*

*Every time you come around*

*They like to make fun of you when you dance*

*Especially when it rains*

*It’s hard to be traditional*

*When you’re living in the nuclear age*

*Has anybody seen good old Mother Earth Around lately?*

*That’s ‘cause she’s living at the public park*

*Bu they’d never let you hunt or trap in there*

*And it’s always closed at dark*

*Yes, and the animals are fair game*

*But they’re living in a cage*

*And if you ever tried to skin one*

*Well, they’d have you on the front page*

* **Excerpt from “It’s Hard to Be Traditional,” by Shingoose, Anishinaabe, 1991**

**A Reduced Land Base**

From Time Immemorial, First Nations and Inuit peoples thrived across the North American continent. Even after the French and the British settled in what is now Canada in the 17th century, First Nations and Inuit peoples still occupied most of the land on the continent. Some farmed or fished, and others followed the migration of animals. The Metis too had strong, ancestral ties to the land. Their homeland stretched across Canada, from coast to coast.

**Inuit Land Base**

The vast territory of the Inuit was in the Arctic region of Canada, where the French and the British did not settle. As a result, it was not until the 1950s, when the Canadian government forced many Inuit to move to permanent settlements, that the Inuit way of life was fundamentally affected. Later, in 1993, the Canadian Government would negotiate with the Inuit of Nunavut to create the Territory of Nunavut and define Inuit ownership and control of the land.

**First Nations Reserves**

In the 19th century, The First Nations lost their extensive land base to the growing numbers of non-Aboriginal peoples. Settlers moved onto the land of the First Nations, often without permission. Governments signed treaties with various First Nations and interpreted this to represent permanent surrender of lands. The decline in First Nations populations through disease, war and starvation hastened the process of land loss. The net (total) effect was a massive dispossession of their lands. While once they occupied an entire continent, today their land base is restricted to just a small percentage of North America.

In Canada, much of the land currently occupied by First Nations was set aside under treaty arrangements, such as the Numbered Treaties. Typically in these treaties, one square mile (259 football fields) of land was added to a reserve for every family of five. The larger the population at the time the treaty was signed, the larger the reserve that was established. But even if the population of a reserve has risen since that time – and First Nations have one of the highest population growth rates of any group in Canada – the size of the reserve has remained constant.

**Forced Removal from the Land**

 In the 1960s, a dam was constructed in northern Manitoba along the Saskatchewan River. The dam, which was part of the Grand Rapids hydro station, flooded 1200 square kilonetres of land, including that belonging to the Chemawawin Moose Lake, and Opaskawayak First Nations, all of which were required to move to make way for the project. Prior to construction of the dam, the governments of Manitoba and Canada participated in negotiations with the First Nations, but these negotiations were unequal. The First Nations had no legal representation and the government did not share information about the move’s impact.

In 1963, the Swampy Cree and Metis of Chemawawin were relocated to a townsite newly built for them. The flooding had destroyed their way of life, which had included hunting, trapping, and gathering. Rising mercury levels in the lake curtailed fishing. The community was no longer self-sufficient, and the move was soon recognized as “a social catastrophe,” leading to years of activism and negotiation. In 1990, at the urging of the Chemawawin people, the Province of Manitoba formally recognized the devastating effects of the move and “the continuing impact from such a substantial alteration.” The community was awarded more than $13 million as compensation for the ongoing effects of the move.

Sadly, this story is not unique. Over the years, the Government of Canada has moved Aboriginal peoples off their traditional lands and made them live in other areas, often ones that were distant, unfamiliar and unsuitable for developing a sustainable community. The people affected by these kinds of relocations were rarely consulted beforehand nor offered an alternative, even though in many instances, they had lived on their land bases since time immemorial, and the relocation would radically alter their ways of life.

**Effects of Relocation**

Research studies from around the world show that the effects of relocating a people from their ancestral territory are deeply scarring. It affects them economically, socially, politically, and psychologically. Relocations sever Aboriginal peoples’ relationship with the environment, and therefore disrupt the intimate knowledge they have of the land. Often, their Traditional Ecological Knowledge cannot be transferred from their old territory to the new land they must inhabit. The loss of that knowledge may mean that the people are no longer self-sufficient, which can create a damaging condition of dependency.

The economic effects of relocations are profound. When people are moved from a relatively large land base with diverse resources to a much diminished base in a concentrated area with fewer economic possibilities, they often suffer from overcrowded conditions and high rates of unemployment. Traditional trade patterns and forms of community cooperation and **reciprocity[[1]](#endnote-1)** often break down.

Social and political structures can also be affected. If the relocation is unpopular or goes badly, community leaders may be discredited. A leadership vacuum may emerge if no one is able to fill the void. The people in the community may become homesick and disconnected from the land. After the Anishinaabe at Grassy Narrows in northern Ontario were moved in 1963 from their former home, rates of depression, alcohol abuse, violent crime, and suicide increased dramatically.

In addition, the relocated Aboriginal peoples often live with long-standing feelings of bitterness and distrust toward the government that moved them, thus making future relations that much more tense.

**Becoming Urban Peoples**

While Aboriginal peoples in Canada have strong cultural, spiritual, and personal ties to the land, more and more are moving from these lands to urban centres (cities). Today, Aboriginal peoples are fast becoming urban peoples. According to the 2006 Census of Canada, while only a small minority of Inuit, about 17%, live in southern urban areas, these same areas are home to a majority of Metis and First Nations. About 69% of Metis now live in urban centres, with more than 40 000 in Winnipeg alone, the highest concentration in any Canadian city.

The 2006 Statistics Canada data also revealed that only about 40% of First Nations people in Canada live on-reserve. In Ontario, the province with the largest number of Aboriginal people, about 80% of them live off-reserve.

**Reasons for Urban Migration**

Rural populations in most countries are shifting to urban areas in pursuit of economic well-being and expanded opportunities. Many Aboriginal people in Canada are being drawn from their rural or northern communities for similar reasons.

Others, however, feel they have no choice but to leave. For many, this is because they are living in conditions of poverty. There are many causes of poverty on reserves and in remote northern communities, for example, high costs of housing and food, and a lack of access to resources, such as natural resources on the traditional lands.

Tragically, poverty can be a self-perpetuating cycle that is difficult to break. Many Aboriginal communities now have jurisdiction over their ancestral lands, and, with access to natural resources and increased decision-making powers, are creating new opportunities for themselves. However, solutions to problems such as poverty and unemployment are not always found, or applied, easily or quickly. Change can be difficult and slow.

One of the most pressing factors on many reserves and in Inuit communities is crowded living conditions. The 2006 Census reports that almost 31% of Inuit live in “crowded” homes (defined by Statistics Canada as more than one person per room), and 28% of Inuit reported that were living in homes in need of major repairs, as compared to 3% and 7%, respectively, of the non-Aboriginal population. Poor living conditions are linked to many health problems, for example, the spread of infectious diseases and an increased risk for mental health challenges, injuries, violence, and family tensions.

Unemployment is also a significant problem. Between 1991 and 2006, the unemployment rate for Aboriginal people has been about twice as high as the national average for non-Aboriginal Canadians. Rates of unemployment are especially high on isolated reserves and in Inuit communities. Unemployment might stem from the change in the way of life forced in many Aboriginal peoples over the last century. They were pressured to move off the land where they were self-sufficient and to rely for their livelihood on jobs and incomes. But their communities were not yet structured in a way that supported this new way of living.

People in the urban centres, however, have a better chance of finding work and of earning a better income. The median income of Aboriginal peoples across Canada is only two-thirds of the median income for non-Aboriginal Canadians. However, in Toronto, the gap is much smaller. There, the median income of Aboriginal people is 90% of that for non-Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal people also move to urban areas for other reasons, including better access to health care, higher education or training opportunities, and business opportunities.

**Effects on Identity**

Life in cities and towns can be very different from life on a reserve or remote community in the North. Whereas Aboriginal peoples are the majority population on First Nations lands, on Metis Settlements, in the **Inuit Nunaat[[2]](#endnote-2)** and throughout the Northwest Territories, and in much of the Yukon, they are a minority in Canadian cities and towns. Sometimes this exposes them to racism and negative stereotyping. Such treatment, especially for people coming from northern communities, can also undermine self-esteem and cause serious problems for the recipients.

There are other challenges as well. Many Aboriginal people attain lower levels of education success than other Canadians. In 2006, 34% of Aboriginal people in Canada had not completed high school (compared to 15% of non-Aboriginal Canadians). Even though many Aboriginal people move from reserves and remote communities to urban centres because job prospects are better than in their home community, their lower levels of education can make finding jobs in cities and towns much more challenging, especially in Canada’s increasingly technological and service-based economy.

When they move to cities and towns, Aboriginal people have to adapt to a new way of life and maintain their cultural heritage while being separated from their ancestral territories and communities. Maintaining an Aboriginal language in an urban centre can be difficult because speakers are often dispersed or there may not have been many to begin with.

Generally, there are fewer opportunities to learn and use Aboriginal languages outside Aboriginal communities. These factors are contributing to the erosion of Aboriginal languages across Canada.

1. This refers to the process of give and take among people, or exchanges that are advantageous to both parties. It is an important value in many Aboriginal societies. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The Unuit homeland that comprises Nunavut along with parts of northern Quebec, the Northwest Territories and northern Labrador. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)