

Stepping Stones



NUMBERED TREATIES WITHIN ALBERTA: TREATY 8

Planning your learning journey

What are Treaties and who are the signatories of Treaty 8?



Source: Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada

*Note: This map shows the approximate area of Treaty land as there is no consensus between rightsholders and stakeholders about exact Treaty boundaries.

FIRST STEPS



“The Government of Canada and the courts understand Treaties between the Crown and Aboriginal people to be solemn agreements that set out promises, obligations and benefits for both parties.”¹

From the perspective of First Nations, Treaties are built on respectful, cooperative and nation-to-nation relationships between First Nations and the Crown on behalf of present and future generations. Treaties outline the rights, obligations and benefits of the signing parties to each other. The intention of the Crown was to gain title to the lands for their own claim. First Nations had other beliefs surrounding the negotiations of the Treaty. To the First Nations, these Treaties are about sharing the land and resources and not extinguishment of title. The intent and provisions of the Treaties do not end. This was acknowledged through a ceremonial and sacred agreement that incorporated the spirit and intent for Treaties to last, “as long as the sun shines, the grass grows and rivers flow.”²





The Cree and the Dene refused to be restricted on reserves and wanted to be free to move around to protect their future existence as hunters, trappers and fishermen.

There are 11 numbered Treaties across Canada, with five of them, Treaties 4, 6, 7, 8 and 10, in Alberta. The First Nations in the territory now known as Alberta were concerned with the alarming spread of diseases such as smallpox and the decimation of the buffalo due to overhunting. As a result, they felt the signing of the Treaty would ensure the survival of their people.

HOW DID TREATY 8 COME TO BE?

After the signing of Treaty 7 in 1877, the Canadian government was not eager to enter into new Treaties, but the next two decades saw dramatic changes to the economic and political environment of the northwest. By 1880 the government had received reports detailing the immense quantities of petroleum and other minerals in the northern part of Rupertsland. When gold was discovered in the Klondike in 1896, the federal government looked to maintain law and order and to establish sovereignty over the territory, which was being overrun by American miners. The intruding miners also had a negative impact on First Nations and Métis hunting and trapping activities in the area, and tensions were rising. Following the 1885 North-West Rebellion, several Métis settled near Lesser Slave Lake and the government was

unsure how to treat them.³ Thus, in 1898 the government decided to start Treaty negotiations to extinguish the Indigenous title to the land prior to developing mineral resources, constructing railways and preparing for settlement. Two commissions were dispatched: one to negotiate Treaty 8 with the First Nations and the other Half-Breed Commission to distribute Métis scrip.

Each Métis family was issued scrip for either \$240 or 240 acres of land. About half of the scrips issued in 1899 were at Lesser Slave Lake, but several scrips were also distributed at Fort Vermilion, Fort Chipewyan, Peace River Landing and other points. Some Métis in the area wanted to be treated as “Indians” and they were taken into Treaty.⁴

Treaty 8⁵ was initially signed on June 21, 1899, by the Crown and Cree from the Lesser Slave Lake area. The commissioners had travelled to different areas to sign 13 additional adhesions with other First Nations in the Treaty area by 1900. Many people, however, were not included in the original Treaty signing because they were hunting on the land or living in isolated areas. First Nations continue to be signed to Treaty 8 up to present day.⁶ The Treaty covers some 840,000 square kilometres in northwestern Canada, making it the largest Treaty by area.



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Helgi Marten passing on his traditional practices, net fishing, to his great-grand nephew, Kyle.

What obligations, rights and benefits are included in Treaty 8?

The terms and implementation of Treaty 8 differ importantly from those of previous Numbered Treaties. The commissioners started negotiations based on the articles in Treaty 7; however, the First Nations in northwest Alberta refused to sign that document because it did not reflect their way of life. First Nations in the north had a different social structure consisting of interaction between groups for trading, and many were related to one another through marriage and kinship. “The Cree and the Chipewyan refused to be parked on reserves and wanted to be free to move around to protect their future existence as hunters, trappers and fishermen.”⁷ After long discussions, the signatories agreed to the Treaty based on a number of oral promises including rights to education, medical care, tax exemptions, immunity from military conscription and access to land, game and other resources for “as long as the sun shone upon those lands.”⁸

WHO ARE THE PEOPLE OF TREATY 8 IN NORTHERN ALBERTA?

Treaty 8 territory covers the areas of northern Alberta, northwestern Saskatchewan, northeastern British Columbia and the southwest portion of the Northwest Territories. It is home to 39 First Nation communities, 24 of which are in Alberta. Many of these communities are culturally diverse and are composed of people who are Cree, Dene Tha’, Dane-zaa and Denesuline as well as Métis and other Albertans.

Cree (Nehiyawak in the Cree language) are the most populous and widely distributed Indigenous peoples in Canada. In Alberta today, Plains Cree First Nations communities are predominately in the Treaty 6 area, and Woodland Cree communities are in the Treaty 8 area. Some of the Cree First Nations communities in Treaty 8 include Woodland Cree Nation,⁹ Bigstone Cree Nation,¹⁰ Mikisew Cree,¹¹ and Fort McMurray #468. Many Woodland Cree live off-reserve throughout Alberta communities and urban centres.

Dene Tha’ (Slavey)¹² means People Common to the Territory or Common Peoples in the Dene language. The majority of the Dene Tha’ live on three separate reserves located in their traditional territory in northwest Alberta: Bushe River, Meander River and Chateh (formerly known as Assumption).¹³

Dane-zaa (Beaver)¹⁴ traditionally lived in small groups of 25–30 people, hunting and trapping in the Peace River area. Today the Dane-zaa live on the Boyer and Child Lake reserves northwest of Fort Vermilion.

Denesuline (Chipewyan) are Dene and closely associated with other northern Dene groups as well as the Cree and Métis with whom they share their communities. Within Treaty 8 more than half the Chipewyan population live off-reserve, and many live in First Nations communities including Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation,¹⁵ Fort McKay First Nation¹⁶ and Chipewyan Prairie First Nation.

NEXT STEPS



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

—Office of the Treaty Commissioner, Saskatchewan

Reconciliation is about understanding the past and working together to build a new future. “We are all Treaty people” means that we all have rights and obligations with respect to this land and each other.

Many schools are on their journey toward understanding that we are all Treaty people and choose to acknowledge the Treaty territory on which they reside. Also, schools are fostering and developing relationships with Indigenous people and communities, which is an essential component on the path towards reconciliation.



MELISSA PURCELL

Continuing Your Learning Journey

- a) *Why were most of the First Nations reserves not originally part of Treaty 8 but came to be established later?*
- b) *How do differing world views impact the interpretation of Treaty provisions in modern times?*



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Spruce Point Cabin on Lake Claire in Wood Buffalo National Park is used as a communal cabin for seasonal area fur trappers.

NOTES

1. Government of Canada Publications. *Treaties with Aboriginal People in Canada*. <https://publications.gc.ca/collections/Collection/R34-6-30-2000E.pdf>.
- Also visit www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1100100028574/1529354437231 for more information on Treaties.
2. Alexander Morris, *The Treaties of Canada with the Indians of Manitoba and the North-West Territories: Including the Negotiations on Which They Were Based, and Other Information Relating Thereto* (Toronto: Willing & Williamson, 1880), 96.
3. For more information go to www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1360948213124/1544620003549.
4. Dennis F K Madill, *Treaty Research Report: Treaty Eight (1899) (Treaties and Historical Research Centre, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1986)*. www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1100100028809/1564415096517
5. For more information go to <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1100100028809/1564415096517>.
6. Treaty 8. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/Treaty-8>.
7. Rene Fumoleau, *As Long as This Land Shall Last: A History of Treaty 8 and 11 1870-1939* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973), 78.
8. Government of Canada. *Treaty research report-Treaty eight (1899)*/by Dennis F.K. Madill. <https://publications.gc.ca/site/eng/426230/publication.html>.
9. For more information go to www.woodlandcree.net.
10. For more information go to www.bigstone.ca/.
11. For more information go to <http://mikisewcree.ca>.
12. For more information go to <http://denetha.ca/history>.
13. Dene Tha'. <https://denetha.ca/>
14. For more information go to www.beaverfirstnation.com.
15. For more information go to <https://acfn.com/>.
16. For more information go to www.fortmckay.com/.

Stepping Stones

Stepping Stones is a publication of the Alberta Teachers' Association's Indigenous Education and Walking Together programs and supports for teachers. This resource series is intended to provide entry points in the development and application of First Nations, Métis and Inuit foundational knowledge.

The Alberta Teachers' Association is grateful for contributions from First Nations, Métis and Inuit Elders, Knowledge Keepers, teachers, school leaders and community members in developing these resources.

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Walking Together

EDUCATION FOR RECONCILIATION

