

WALKING TOGETHER

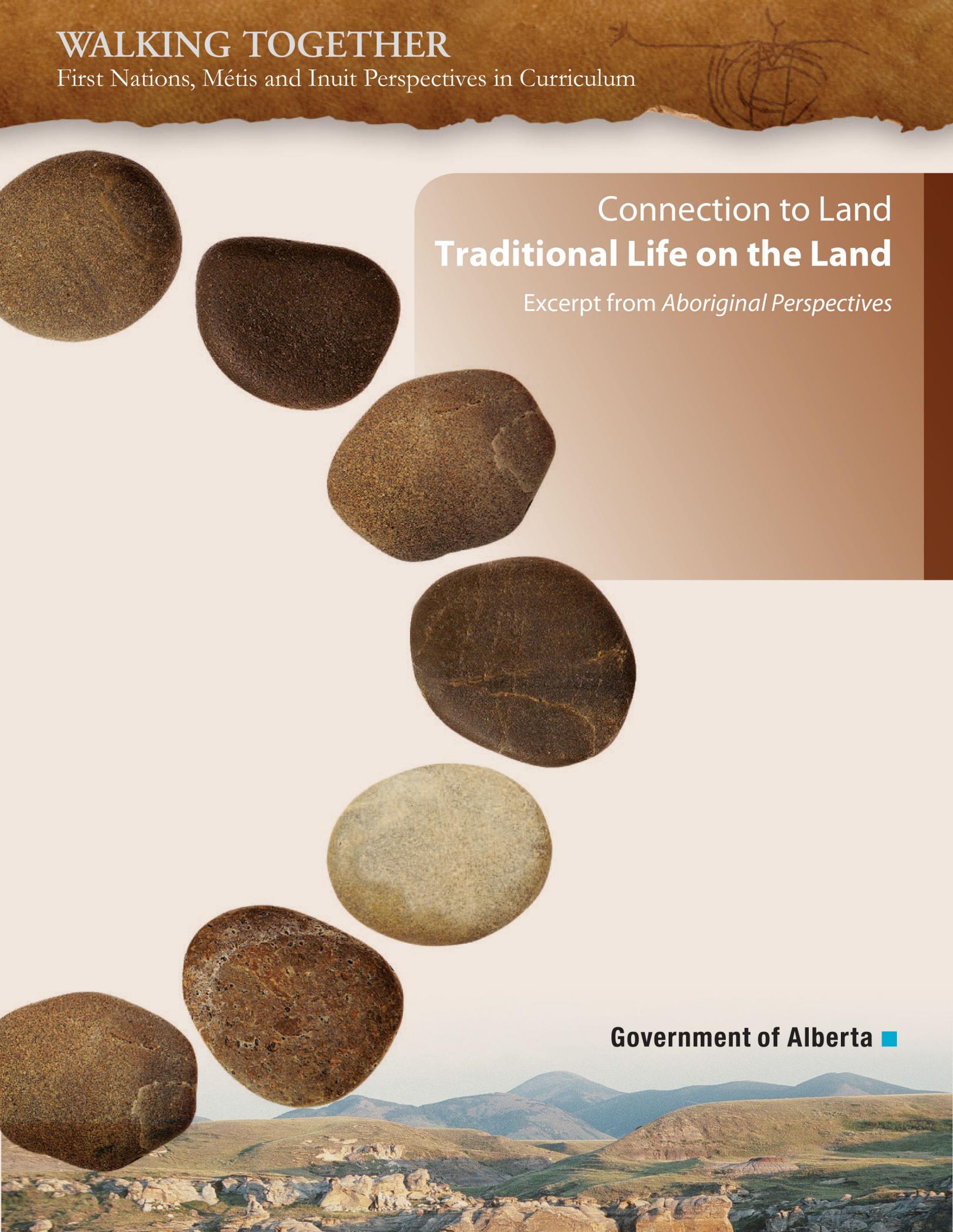
First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum

Connection to Land

Traditional Life on the Land

Excerpt from *Aboriginal Perspectives*

Government of Alberta ■





TRADITIONAL LIFE ON THE LAND

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TRADITIONAL LIFE ON THE LAND

The first people who lived in North America lived in harmony with the environment, making little change to the landscape over thousands of years. Where they lived had an impact on how they lived — people in the north had a different lifestyle from those in the south — but all shared a knowledge of and respect for nature that affected every part of their lives.

Where resources were plentiful, people lived in larger groups and developed more structured political, economic, and social lives. Most First Nations and Inuit people, however, lived in small, mobile groups. People travelled in regular seasonal patterns throughout traditional territories, which are lands their ancestors had also occupied. Seasonal movements allowed people to make the best possible use of all resources available to them. Their cultures were adapted to this mobility with complex systems of social organization that maintained kinship bonds between people who were related, but who sometimes lived far apart for most of the year.

First Nations and Inuit cultures are closely connected to the features of specific environments. Groups living in similar environments often shared many cultural characteristics. For this reason, it is possible to begin a study of First Nations and Inuit peoples by dividing the country into six geographic environments — the Arctic, Subarctic, Eastern Woodlands, Plains, Plateau, and Pacific Northwest. Each environment provide resources and challenges in varying degrees. Each was a cultural environment — home to groups of people sharing similar political, economic, and social institutions. Institutions are regular, organized patterns of activity within a community.

Keep in mind, however, that differences of language and lifestyle existed even within a cultural group sharing a similar environment. Also remember that although First Nations and Inuit cultures followed traditional ways for many centuries, their cultures never stopped evolving (as all cultures do) to suit changing circumstances.

In this textbook, the term *traditional* refers to ways of life that existed before contact with Europeans. It is also used to refer to contemporary ways of life in which people are connected to the spiritual, social, and cultural teachings of their ancestors.

PACIFIC NORTHWEST

Long before the first European visits to North America, First Nations of the Pacific Northwest enjoyed the rich resources of their coastal territory. For these nations, food was almost always plentiful year-round. In this mild, humid climate, dense rain — forests covered the land,



providing an abundance of edible plants and animals such as deer, bears, and mountain sheep. Fish filled the many rivers and the ocean, which also provided shellfish, seals, and whales.

The abundance allowed people to live in larger groups and build permanent villages. An estimated 200 000 people lived in this small region around the end of the fifteenth century. Because they had to spend less time on day-to-day tasks, such as finding food, these people had more leisure time. Leisure time allowed them to develop many permanent structures and artistic achievements, such as the large totem poles the region is famous for today.

As some of the world's largest trees grew here, wood was a primary resource. Cedar was used to build large plank houses, bowls, totem poles, toys, sleds, and many other objects. The Tlingit people in the north crafted dugout canoes with projecting knobs to break up ice floes. The Haida were famous for their enormous decorated boats that carried as many as sixty people at a time as they travelled from their islands to fish, hunt, and trade.

PLATEAU

Traditional ways of life for First Nations from the Plateau region made use of a diverse landscape that varied from desert to forest-covered mountains. First Nations in this region hunted the jackrabbit and antelope that lived on the sagebrush and grasses of the dry flatlands and rolling hills. More game lived in the tall forests — deer, elk, and bear. Various kinds of fish swam in the many rivers and streams. Mountain areas received lots of rain and snow, but little moisture reached the desert land between the ranges.

Many edible plants, such as camas lilies and edible bulbs, wild onions, and wild carrots, grew on the grasslands. Blackberries and huckleberries were harvested from the river valleys. In the fall, salmon filled the rivers, swimming upstream from the ocean to lay eggs.

For most of the year, people lived in temporary wooden lodges. During the winter, they lived in pithouses in villages along the rivers. Winter was a time for activities such as basket weaving, singing, and storytelling.

Although the many groups of this region spoke different languages, they were often in contact, travelling the rivers to trade.

PLAINS

Life on the land for First Nations from the Plains embraced the wide-open spaces and expansive sky of their grassland home. A few wooded areas dotted the landscape, stands of mostly willow and cottonwoods along river valleys. But the region was mostly grass — kilometres and kilometres of perfect grazing ground for buffalo.

For the people of the Plains, this hefty animal provided a wealth of useful material. As well as food, the buffalo provided material for bedding, clothing, thread, weapons, tools, ceremonial objects, glue, and fuel for fires. Communal buffalo hunts occurred each summer, gathering many independent groups together. These groups were usually connected by kinship bonds or other kinds of partnerships or alliances. The large hunts required much organization and cooperation. Smaller hunts occurred during the winter, when individual groups hunted alone.

Buffalo was the staple, but other animals helped vary the diet of Plains dwellers. Pronghorn antelope, mule deer, elk, and prairie birds were plentiful. Hundreds of seasonal plants, such as wild turnip and saskatoon berries, supplemented the diet of all Plains First Nations.

For centuries, First Nations people on the Plains, as in other regions, travelled by foot.



Dogs carried supplies and belongings, dragging them on travois made of poles and skins.

In most parts of the Plains, First Nations lived along river valleys, fanning and migrating seasonally to hunt. Only a group of nations called the Blackfoot Confederacy in the northern Plains and the Comanches in the south did not grow crops such as corn. Nations of the Blackfoot Confederacy were primarily hunters, sometimes trading with southern groups for agricultural produce. This limited agriculture among Plains First Nations fell off dramatically once the horse became part of their cultures.

EASTERN WOODLANDS

First Nations from the Eastern Woodlands traditionally lived a way of life that was entwined with the rich forest around them. A mixed forest of deciduous and evergreen trees covered the region, providing the people who lived here with a wide variety of plant foods —berries, nuts and wild rice — and game such as deer, rabbit, beaver, otter, fowl and fish. Summers were longer and hotter than elsewhere in Canada, which provided excellent conditions for growing plants.

The region was rich in resources and was home to First Nations living in year-round settlements. Some villages housed around 1500 people. The Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) and the Ouendat (Huron) were hunters and successful farmers, growing crops such as squash, corn, and beans.

People built permanent homes — wooden longhouses — that housed several families. Sometimes after ten to fifty years, the entire village would move to a different location with fresh soil for growing crops and new supplies of firewood.

SUBARCTIC

First Nations of the Subarctic made use of the extensive forests and many lakes, ponds, sloughs, and rivers of the region. Summers were short and hot, often plagued with mosquitoes; winters were long and cold, usually with deep snow.

The forest provided people with many edible plants and game animals. Most Subarctic people lived in small groups to hunt moose, caribou, muskoxen, deer and buffalo. Small game included beaver, mink, hare, otter and porcupine. People also ate fish and wildfowl. Hunters preserved their catch by making pemmican — pulverized meat packed with suet and berries. Wild rice fed the Anishinabé people, who helped spread the seeds into new areas.

Houses in the region were portable — tipis, wigwams, or temporary lean-tos made of poles, brush, and leaves. Toboggans and snowshoes made winter travel easier. Birchbark canoes enabled travel along the waterways and were lightweight enough to be easily carried.

Subarctic First Nations often used birchbark to make cooking vessels and containers. Many groups created elaborate designs on clothing, bags, and boxes with dyed porcupine quills and other natural materials.

ARCTIC

To peoples from the south, the Arctic offers one of the most challenging environments in North America. Here, summers are brief and winters are long with severe blizzards and long periods of darkness. No trees grow on the Arctic tundra, only grasses, lichens, and mosses. The soil beneath the surface remains frozen year-round. The animals of the land — including *tuttu*, which is



Inuktitut for “caribou,” polar bears, and smaller mammals — are spread over a huge territory. Animals of the rivers and sea are often hidden beneath thick ice.

To Inuit peoples, however, the land was their home and provided all they needed for life. Some Inuit people built winter houses from their most abundant resources — snow and ice. Other Arctic dwellings and tools were made of earth, rock, driftwood, moss, bone, and skins. For protection against extreme cold, the Inuit created many specialized articles of clothing. They made insulated waterproof pants and parkas using animal skins and furs, and they lined mukluks (soft boots made of seal skin) and mittens with down and moss for added warmth.

Dog teams pulled sleds, and kayaks with sealed cockpits enabled sea travel. Some umiaks, which are large sealskin boats that can hold up to twelve people, had bone runners on the bottom for travel across ice.

Inuit cultures across the Arctic showed regional variations, just as Subarctic cultures varied across the wide region. For example, the Caribou Inuit lived inland, hunting their namesake animals and fishing in freshwater lakes, and the Kitlinermiut (Copper Inuit) crafted metal tools.

A LIFE OF MOVEMENT

For many First Nations and Inuit peoples, permanent (or even long-term) settlement was not an option. The environment contained everything that was needed, but resources were often widely distributed and only seasonally available. The people moved from place to place according to well-defined patterns organized around the availability of resources. Each year, they knew when eggs would hatch, when the buffalo would gather, when to pick plants for medicines, when to tell stories, and when it was time to retreat to more sheltered areas for winter. Life for most First Nations followed a circular seasonal time frame. In other words, time was measured through natural cycles such as the movement of the sun and changing appearance or behaviour of plants and animals.

People knew their seasonal patterns of movement, or migration, from knowledge passed through oral history from generation to generation. Movements were not aimless or haphazard. Groups always had a purpose and a specific destination within their traditional territory.

Prominent landscape features often acted as landmarks or boundaries. For example, in the nineteenth century, nations of the Blackfoot Confederacy used a territory that was bound in the north by the North Saskatchewan River, in the east by the badlands, and in the west by the Rocky Mountains. Where no natural landmarks existed, people would build them. Cairns, mounds of rocks used for this purpose, once dotted the Plains.

A YEAR OF MIGRATION

Seasonal movements through a territory were connected to the use of available resources. The First Nations living in the northern Subarctic knew well the migration trails of the herds of caribou that were a staple of their diet. In places where the trail narrowed or crossed a body of water, the people gathered each year to hunt. In similar fashion, other First Nations followed familiar trails to good hunting or fishing spots, sacred places, and regions where useful plants could be harvested. Such knowledge was gained through generations of experience and observation of the natural world. The following section describes what a typical year might have

looked like for a group from the Blackfoot Confederacy centuries ago.

In the spring, after a long, cold winter, the days on the Plains finally began to lengthen. The people were able to spend more time outside. When the weather warmed and the danger of spring snowstorms ended, the people moved their camp from the shelter of the river valleys onto the wide expanses of the grasslands. From there, they travelled as needed, hunting *iinii* — which is Blackfoot for “buffalo” — and collecting plants. They usually chose camp-sites on high land, near wood and water.

In the summer, when the saskatoon berries ripened, the group travelled to a traditional gathering place. Each group took its traditional spot in a great circle of tipis. Members of the Blackfoot Confederacy called it *Akóka'tssin* — “the time of all people camping together.” It was the only time of the year when the whole confederacy lived in one place.

After *Akóka'tssin*, the large group split up and once again spread out onto the Plains to hunt buffalo and other game, and to gather berries.

In the fall, the group migrated back towards their wintering grounds. They began to prepare a buffalo pound near the *pisskan* — “buffalo jump.” At the best hunting sites, several groups might work together in communal hunts.

When the frosty nights arrived, the group moved into a wooded river valley, not far from other wintering groups. The buffalo also preferred to spend the winter in wooded areas, making easy prey for skilled hunters, who tracked them through the snow.

If the group had an adequate supply of firewood and food, it might spend the entire winter -often more than five months — at a single campsite. With the long nights and cold weather, group members spent most of their time in their tipis. It was a time of storytelling, educating, socializing, and ceremonies.