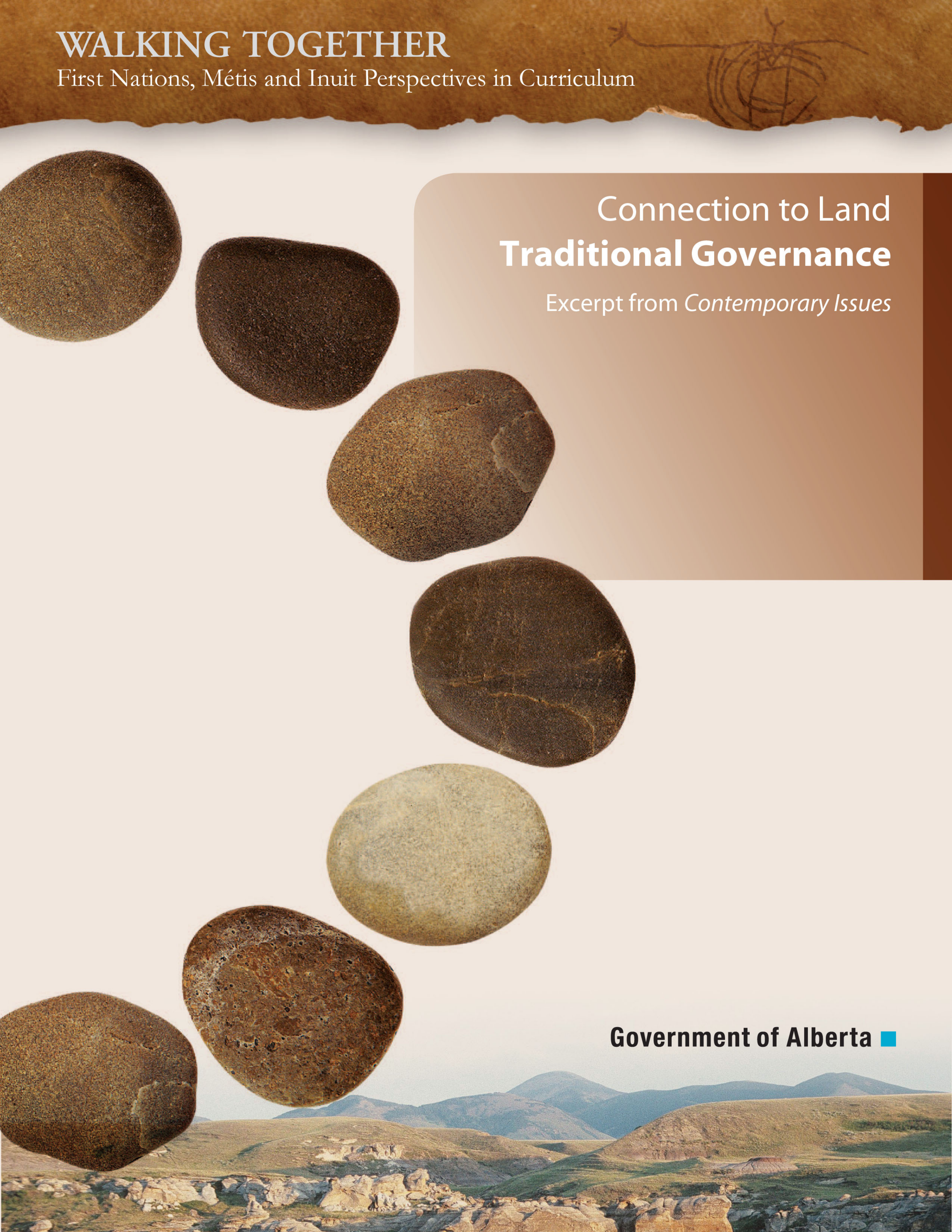

WALKING TOGETHER

First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum

Connection to Land

Traditional Governance

Excerpt from *Contemporary Issues*

Government of Alberta

TRADITIONAL GOVERNANCE
Excerpt from *Contemporary Issues*

TRADITIONAL GOVERNANCE
The land shaped virtually every aspect of traditional First Nations and Inuit life. It helped determine day-to-day activities, social and political structures, language, and even art and spirituality. It lay at the centre of people's very identity. Governance for the people often meant governance for the land. Although First Nations and Inuit people inhabited North America for thousands of years before Europeans arrived, they left little impact on the landscape. They found ways to live in balance with their environment. Their needs were the land's needs and the land's needs were their own.

GEOGRAPHY AND GOVERNANCE
Canadian territory can be divided into six geographic environments: Arctic, Subarctic, Eastern Woodlands, Plains, Plateau, and Pacific Northwest. Each geographic environment provides different resources and challenges to the people who live there, shaping both their lives and their cultures. As a result, people within the same environment frequently share many similar cultural characteristics. Each geographic environment corresponds to a general cultural environment.

THE ARCTIC
Many aspects of Inuit culture directly reflect the demands of life in the Arctic. Inuit people developed many unique technologies that allowed them to live in an extreme environment. The people received much of what they needed for life from just a few resources, such as seals, caribou, and whales.

Traditional Inuit societies were built around extended family groups. Families came together in larger camps when hunting was good and moved apart when food was scarce. They built dwellings of snow, ice, skins, whalebone, driftwood, and other available materials, and designed highly specialized clothing to keep themselves warm and dry. They travelled by dogsled across the land, by *qayaq* (kayak) on the sea, and by *umiaq* (large boats with bone runners on the bottom) over ice.

This excerpt on traditional governance ©Nelson Education Ltd. *Contemporary Issues,* Toronto, ON, 2005, pp. 38–45.

THE SUBARCTIC

The Subarctic covers the largest proportion of Canada. Except for the tundra in the north, the Subarctic is largely covered by dense forests, with many lakes, rivers, and wetlands. First Nations of the Subarctic traditionally supported themselves by hunting, trapping, and fishing, and by gathering edible plants. Like the people of the Arctic, they lived mostly in extended family groups, moving seasonally to take advantage of different resources. As a result, their home included a large territory. Family groups would gather at specific times of the year to celebrate, participate in ceremonies, and socialize with friends and relations.

THE EASTERN WOODLANDS

In the Eastern Woodlands, migratory movements were not usually required to take advantage of the region's animal and plant resources. In the southern parts of this region, for example, people lived in year-round settlements and grew crops such as squash, corn, and beans.

These settlements had large populations, so the people had more structured political systems than the mobile groups of the Arctic and Subarctic.

In northern regions of the Eastern Woodlands, agriculture was less common. As a result, ways of life and political institutions reflected the needs of smaller, more mobile groups.

THE PLAINS

On the Plains, First Nations life revolved around the buffalo. For thousands of years, the buffalo provided the people with food, fuel, clothing, bedding, tools, ceremonial objects, and shelter. It was the centre of many spiritual traditions. For much of the year, Plains First Nations lived in groups of 80 to 240 people. In the summer, several such groups gathered for communal buffalo hunts, social events, and ceremonies. Political institutions adapted to the size of the group, becoming more structured when larger numbers of people gathered.

THE PLATEAU

First Nations of the Plateau region supported themselves by hunting, by gathering edible plants, and by fishing in the region's many rivers and streams.

For most of the year, people migrated in seasonal patterns, living in temporary wooden lodges or hide-covered tipis. In the winter, they gathered together in larger, semi-permanent villages along the rivers. Their systems of leadership and government, like those of other First Nations, adapted to the needs of the community and size of the group

PACIFIC NORTHWEST

In the resource-rich coastal areas of the Pacific Northwest, First Nations lived in large, relatively permanent settlements. The forests had abundant game and edible plants, and the enormous trees provided excellent building materials. The ocean offered fish, shellfish, and marine mammals, and the rivers teemed with salmon. As in the Eastern Woodlands, the high concentration of resources encouraged people to live in large groups. This resulted in highly structured social and political lives.

These geographic and cultural classifications serve as only a rough framework. First Nations and Inuit peoples of long ago did not always conform to such neat categories. Groups

living in similar environments sometimes had very different ideas, languages, and lifestyles. Cultures evolved naturally, and ways of life adapted to suit specific circumstances, not arbitrary categories.

For example, the Métis culture that developed in the West was a combination of European and First Nations traditions. This was a natural response to social and economic conditions of the fur trade, in which Europeans and First Nations were partners.

In general, however, the geographic divisions described in this section offer a way to make reasonable generalizations about highly diverse First Nations and Inuit cultures. In turn, the generalizations point to how closely the cultures are tied to particular lands.

TRADITIONAL TERRITORIES

To the eyes of the first European arrivals, Canada looked like a wilderness, largely uninhabited and undeveloped. The Europeans came from a continent of cities, factories, and farms. To them, Canada was a land of untapped potential.

To First Nations and Inuit eyes, of course, the land looked very different. It was their home, the provider of life — not a resource to be tamed and exploited.

Most First Nations people did not see one particular spot on the landscape as home, the way somebody from London or Paris might. Their way of life encompassed large territories. Even groups from the Pacific Northwest and Eastern Woodlands used large territories around their permanent settlements. Many people moved from place to place throughout the year in a circular seasonal time frame. Their movements followed traditional trails that corresponded to seasonal change and the availability of resources. Land and resources might be shared, depending on circumstances. Territories might overlap or shift over time, but people generally lived in much the same territory as their ancestors and travelled the same routes each season.

As part of seasonal movements, people encountered other groups and had various ways of ensuring harmonious relations. These included gift-giving, intermarriage, treaties, and other kinds of alliances. At certain times of the year, many different groups would gather at specific locations to trade, renew alliances, and socialize. In Alberta, two regular meeting areas included Head-Smashed-In in southern Alberta and Ena K'ering Ka Tuwe (Cree Burn Lake) in northern Alberta. People gathered regularly at these spots to use communal resources and trade with one another.

Despite a certain degree of territorial flexibility, First Nations derived much of their identity from their relationship with specific places on the landscape. These relationships did not change. Many First Nations' names reflect the environments in which they lived. The Huron called themselves Ouendat — "the people of the peninsula" — because their territory was surrounded on three sides by water. The Maliseet of New Brunswick call themselves Welestuk- "of the beautiful river." The Gitskan are the "people of the Skeena [River]" and the Toquaht are the "people of the narrow beach." The people of such territories had many rules about respecting and preserving the integrity of the area. Ensuring that the Skeena River was healthy was tantamount to ensuring that the Gitskan, the people of the river, were healthy.

TRADITIONAL GOVERNMENT

Aboriginal people's traditional leadership and decision-making methods were closely connected to how groups lived on the land. For example, small groups that migrated seasonally had different needs from large groups that lived in permanent settlements.

Small groups can be more flexible about leadership and decision making because it is easier to ensure that everyone has a voice. Leaders can be called upon when needed, and group members consulted informally. For example, in migratory groups of the Plains, Arctic, and Subarctic, leaders were often not selected in a formal way. They were more often recognized by their community in a process that was informal and fluid, depending on the needs of the group. Members of a community might turn consistently to particular individuals for guidance on spiritual matters and others for guidance on hunting or conflict resolution. Sometimes several individuals would be held in high regard as leaders for a group.

Other circumstances, such as large ceremonial gatherings or communal buffalo hunts, might require more formal leadership and peacekeeping. Each nation and community had its own ways of dealing with large groups, but governance always responded to the needs of the people and the land.

For example, the Dunne-za did not have laws. According to Dominique Habitant, a Dunne-za First Nation Elder, the people instead asked Teegay Ontlay (HeWho Made the World) for guidance.

People would then get direction through dreams or signs. Sometimes a prophet or wise person would get special knowledge.

In traditional worldviews, one area of life cannot be separated from another. Government was traditionally not an aspect of society that was separate from other aspects, such as hunting, spirituality, and culture. All were woven into customs and practices that made a way of life. The source for all customs and laws was the Creator.

For many First Nations, the Creator's laws were apparent in the way the world functioned. The Creator's laws governed all of existence, not just human interactions. People were reminded how they should live by observing the natural world around them — animals, plants, weather, stars, and the moon. Laws of governance could not conflict with economic, social, or spiritual laws, because all followed natural laws. Natural laws are the Creator's laws written upon the world.

MÉTIS GOVERNANCE

Traditional Métis governance was also tied to the land, but in a different way than First Nations and Inuit governance. Like many First Nations, Métis people at Red River relied upon the buffalo hunt for food, clothing, and trade. Hundreds of men, women, and children needed to be organized and prepared for their roles in the hunt. At the beginning of each hunt, captains, soldiers, and guides would be selected by the group, with one captain as senior leader. These leaders formed a council that developed strict rules to ensure the hunt's success and to deal with any problems.

This structure and style of leadership was easily adapted to military situations, which was part of the reason Métis people were a powerful force in situations of conflict. Métis history

includes many military victories, such as the Battle of Seven Oaks in 1816 and the Battle of Grand Coteau in 1851.

Métis settlements had organized systems for governing life outside the hunt as well. Rules reflected the values and priorities of the community. As early as 1870, the Métis people from the Lac Ste Anne, St. Albert, and St. Joachim parishes in present-day Alberta had a comprehensive set of laws for their communities, along with a clear system for enforcement. These laws are known as the Laws of St. Albert.

Church leaders were instrumental in developing the laws, reflecting the cultural importance of the Roman Catholic Church to the communities. A number of the laws reflected moral attitudes about correct behaviour that came from the church's teachings. However, the rules also reflected how the community made their living off the land. Of the thirty-nine Laws of St. Albert, fourteen dealt with horses, cattle, and the management of land and fences. The importance of horses to the community is clearly revealed by comparing the penalties for offences. The fine for horse theft — four pounds, ten shillings — was the same as the fine for assaulting a person with a weapon.