

First Nations



Long before the first European explorers landed on the shores of North America, the vast land mass that is now Canada was populated by a diverse range of aboriginal peoples. Misnamed “Indians” by Christopher Columbus in 1492 when he mistakenly believed that he had arrived in India, today they form an important part of Canadian society.

As the original inhabitants of Canada, and with a history that dates back tens of thousand of years, Indian tribal groups are today referred to as “First Nations.” Despite sharing a deep and spiritual relationship with the land and the life forms it supports, First Nations have widely varying cultures, customs and languages. They are also politically and culturally distinct from Inuit — aboriginal people who live in the Northwest Territories, northern Quebec and Labrador. A third group — the Métis — are the offspring of Indian and non-Indian parents.

Registration

Today, there are more than 440 000 registered Indians in Canada. To be registered means that an individual is recognized under federal law as being a status Indian and is listed on the Indian Register which is maintained for the Government of Canada by its Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND).

Registration entitles Indians to certain benefits (including assistance for post-secondary education and some non-insured health benefits) which may not be available to non-Indians.

Membership in a band

Registered Indians may also be members of a band — a formally recognized group of Indians. Membership in a band entitles Indian individuals to the collective treaty and/or aboriginal rights of that band. Band members may also have the right to live on a reserve and to share in the assets of the band.

Terms used in this publication include:

“Indian” and “status Indian” refers to an individual who is recorded as an Indian in the Indian Register; most are members of an Indian band.

“Treaty Indian” is a term used to describe an Indian who is a member of a band that signed a treaty.

“Non-status Indian” is an individual who is of Indian ancestry but not registered as an Indian. Together, the Metis, Inuit and Indians (status, non-status, and treaty Indians) are referred to as aboriginal, first nations or native.