

ABORIGINAL PLANET

At the close of the United Nations International Decade of the World's Indigenous People, Aboriginal people have made advances in Canada and abroad, but there is still much to do.

Poised on a cliff in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains overlooking Canada's windswept western plains, tourists can be forgiven for losing their sense of time and place. At Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in southern Alberta, they can imagine the sights and sounds of the distant past, when vast herds of buffalo wandered the Prairies, providing food and clothing to the Blackfoot people who hunted them each autumn by skillfully steering them over the precipice to be butchered below.

It's a scene that continued for 6,000 years but came to an abrupt end in the late 19th century when European settlers arrived, bringing new diseases, almost eliminating the buffalo and erasing forever a way of life.

Today, with Aboriginal people serving as guides, the ancient site testifies to a rich and complex culture that existed for thousands of years in harmony with the land and water. Paying tribute to an irretrievable past, Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump shares with visitors from around the world deeply held Aboriginal values and traditions inextricably woven into the fabric of Canada. It also serves as a reminder that those who came to North America could not have survived without the aid of the Aboriginal people, who helped them conquer the challenges of climate and geography.

The site is also a poignant symbol of the shared history, complex relationships, values, goals and aspirations of the First Peoples in Canada and around the world and those who came after them.

Home and native land

Accounting for about 1.4 million of the country's 31 million people, there are three Indigenous groups in Canada: the Inuit who are predominantly resident in the North; about 630 First Nations, the largest group; and the Métis, people of mixed First Nation and European ancestry. Referred to



photos: Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump

collectively as Aboriginal people, each has its own unique heritage, culture, language, traditions and beliefs. Among First Nations alone, there are more than 50 languages. The name "Canada" itself is derived from a word in the language of the Huron Nation meaning "village" or "settlement."

Although constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and treaty rights exists in Canada, Aboriginal people, like Indigenous cultures in other countries, have faced many hardships.

As the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People comes to an end in December, they can look back on 10 years of both progress and challenges.

Among the first major steps forward in Canada was the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996), which made several recommendations, including the need for Aboriginal people to develop self-government. In response, the Government of Canada issued *Gathering Strength—Canada's Aboriginal Action Plan*, a blueprint for renewing the partnership with Aboriginal people, strengthening governance and supporting strong communities, people and economies.

The repatriation of important cultural objects such as ancestral remains from public and private collections has

Woven into the fabric of Canada: Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump pays tribute to an irretrievable past and shares with visitors some deeply held Aboriginal values and traditions.

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