

Rural Classrooms with Global Vision

Governance in the Wabanaki and New Brunswick

The origins of the current parliamentary system in New Brunswick stretch back as far as 1784 when the province was founded as a colony of Great Britain. Local systems of governance, however, were in place long before the arrival of the British. The province was created on the traditional lands of the Maliseet, Mi'kmaq (Micmac) and Passamaquoddy First Nations, each of which had developed unique systems of self-governance. While the details and degree of structure of these systems varied between nations, all were effective and served their peoples' needs.

Traditional Indigenous Systems of Governance

The First Nation groups that have historically inhabited New Brunswick are Wabanakis, literally meaning the "People of the Dawn" or Easterners. Although there are differing opinions on the correct usage of the Wabanaki name, here it is used to collectively refer to the Passamaquoddies, Penobscots, Maliseets, Mi'kmaqs, and the Abenakis of Quebec and of western Maine. Of these groups, the Passamaquoddies, Maliseets, and Mi'kmaqs historically inhabited the province of New Brunswick.

Learning Outcomes

1. Demonstrate understanding of regional and national governance system and the rights and responsibility of citizenry in democracy;
2. Make appropriate decisions and take responsibility for those decisions;
3. Demonstrate understanding of their own and others' cultural heritage;
4. Examine human rights issues.

Curriculum Entry Points: Grade 9 Social Studies; Grade 9 Human Rights; Grade 11 Global Studies; Grade 11 Western History; Grade 12 World Issues; Grade 12 Political Science; Grade 12 Law.



Photo: Falls Brook Centre

Communities and traditional governance structures among the Wabanaki are strongly tied to the family unit. When the Europeans first arrived in the Maritimes, the Wabanaki people lived in settlements based on family ties. These villages could easily change in size between seasons and between years depending on the amount of extended family incorporated. Larger villages had leaders known as sakoms, and it was these individuals who met and negotiated with the Europeans. The sakom, whose leadership position was often passed from father to son, carried high prestige in the community because of his healing abilities, his age, his hunting expertise, and his family connections.

In contrast to the authoritative approach of European governments, decisions in Wabanaki communities were based on the consensus of adult men and women. Consequently, the sakom's primary duty was to listen rather than rule, and coercive establishments like prisons, courts, and police forces were unnecessary for the Wabanaki.



Photo source: The Wabanakis of Maine and the Maritimes

While the influence of a sakom was often limited to the river drainage system in which he lived, sakoms arranged meetings and formed alliances when greater collaboration was necessary. Because the autonomy of numerous leaders was maintained and groups operated by consensus, unanimous decisions could be difficult to attain and disagreements were not uncommon. Despite such challenges, this decentralized system of governance was favoured by the Wabanakis because it upheld the principles of egalitarianism and freedom of choice that they valued. The French perceived the strength and order of their own centralized government structure as superior, but the Wabanaki felt it promoted fear and oppression.

In the 150 years following the initial contact between the Europeans and indigenous peoples of the Maritimes, the major challenge for the Wabanaki was to maintain the equality and freedom that they valued while simultaneously forming larger and stronger units that could counter the threat of European expansion. To accomplish this feat, the Wabanaki built on shared beliefs and adaptations, on previous alliances, and relationships formed through personal contact and trade. By the mid-17th century, indigenous peoples in New Brunswick belonged to 2 newly formed alliances: a political entity known as the Wabanaki confederacy, and a confederacy between first nations in Maine, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia with Catholic “Indians”^{**} (those natives converted to catholicism—Hurons, and some Algonquin and Mohawk nations). Participating First Nations maintained their separate identities as distinct peoples while working together toward the common objectives of defense and survival.

Land and Treaties

During the eighteenth century, the Wabanaki acted as most nations would to try to protect their sovereignty and access to land. When treaties made with the British Crown were broken or appeared to be broken, fighting and conflict would sometimes break out. However, the indigenous groups relied on diplomacy to a greater extent and consistently chose negotiation over warfare.

Between 1725 and 1779, early French and British governments entered into a series of treaties with the Aboriginal peoples that they encountered upon their arrival in the Maritimes. These first agreements, known as the Peace and Friendship treaties, were completed during a period of continual warfare between England and France. They were intended to secure the neutrality or assistance of the Aboriginal nations in exchange for a commitment not to interfere with traditional practices such as hunting and fishing.

^{**} terms such as “Indian”, “Tribe” and “Band” are terms that have been imposed upon the Wabanaki people by settlers. These terms are often derogatory and disparaging to First Nations people and should not be used. First Nations people have their own language and labels for their own people passed down from their ancestors and used long before the European settlers arrived. This is the language that is still acceptable today. Terms such as “Aboriginal”, “Native”, and “First Nation community” are preferred by the Wabanaki people, consistent with their principles of harmony, respect and unity. ^{**}

Assembly of First Nations

Presently, the Assembly of First Nations is the national representative organization of the more than 630 First Nation’s communities in Canada. The organization grew out of the need for First Nations Peoples to meet the past and present challenges that threaten their unique identities and rights as the first inhabitants of North American continent. Each year, the Chiefs meet to set national policy and direction through resolution and, every three years, elect a National Chief. The current National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations is Matthew Coon Come. Between their annual meetings, the Chiefs meet every 3-4 months at “Confederacy of Nations” forums with other regional leaders.





Unfortunately, these treaties largely failed because of misunderstandings on both sides of exactly what the treaties meant, as well as different conceptions of property and land. Whereas the Wabanaki believed that the parties had agreed to share the land and its resources, the Europeans believed that they had received exclusive possession of the territories in Question [these agreements were not adhered to by colonial authorities (in particular the governors) as the legally binding documents that they truly were and still are—not just agreements, but *international legal documents*]. Each side felt that the other had broken the terms of the agreement, and the repetition of this basic misunderstanding has produced enormous and unresolved problems.

Over the years, lands traditionally occupied by the Wabanaki have been settled by Europeans. The federal government set aside some areas as reserves for the indigenous peoples, but these reserves were generally remote and isolated. They were lands deemed useless to the settlers because of their poor and unworkable state; unable to be developed for any economic purposes.

Consequently, residents generally had few employment opportunities nearby, endured poor access to education and medical care, and experienced high unemployment and poverty. Peoples who had once lived in abundance were now impoverished, and faced severe prejudice amongst the rest of society.

The Wabanaki, along with other aboriginal groups across Canada, continue to work to maintain their identities as separate peoples and to survive as cohesive communities. They have mounted successful campaigns through the courts to win reparations for the unlawful use of their land, and are increasingly asserting the rights that they have long been denied.

Suggested Class Activities / Discussion Questions

1. What aspects of Wabanaki governance could work within the current provincial governance structure? Compare the two types of governance (refer to Provincial Governance leaflet for details). What is representational democracy? Who is it representing? What does consensus mean? How does consensus work?
2. Thinking about treaties: Misunderstandings over deeds was one of the main reasons for conflict between Wabanakis and the English (examples of deeds may be found in The Wabanakis of Maine and the Maritimes). Discuss the different English and Wabanaki concepts of property rights and of what was understood when deeds were signed.
3. Learning about another culture in a positive way can lead students to open their minds to trying to understand people with different backgrounds from their own. How can exploring the Wabanaki culture help us to better understand their ways and form of governance?
4. It is important to hear Wabanakis' own voices when studying Wabanaki history and culture. Why not invite an Elder or a resource person of the Maliseet, Mi'kmaq, or Pasamaquoddy people to come and share their knowledge with your class?
5. *Oral History* is the telling of what took place in the past. It might include descriptions of people and places, family trees (the names and relationships of ancestors) and stories about faraway places—as well as events that occurred in the local area. By the telling of these stories, a culture is kept alive. Have students research a story about the Wabanaki people and their friendship treaties, and maintain an Oral History by retelling this story aloud.

Some ideas for what you can do?

- These days we have an abundance of books, televisions, movies and computers. Information travels quickly across faceless technology such as the world wide web. But what is the source of this information? Who is giving us our teachings? In indigenous communities around the world, it is the Elders' words in the society that are held with most respect. Elders have a wisdom and experience that comes with age.

“Most people look to the Elders as teachers. They are. But we also look at the children, look at them as teachers.” - First Nations Elder



photo: Steve Wall, Wisdom's Daughters

Take time to sit with your grandparents or other seniors and Elders and listen to their stories.

- How do you make decisions with your friends? Does everyone get a chance to give their input? Do you wait to follow through with actions until everyone is in agreement? Next time you have a group decision to make, sit down with your friends in a circle and talk things out until everyone is comfortable. What could you learn from this process?
- How do you think we could all learn and benefit from Wabanaki culture? Share your ideas with those around you. Visit with people from the Wabanaki and invite them to share in activities with you, your family, your school, your community.

Where to find More Information

You can get more **materials and instructional resources** on the Maliseet and Mi'kmaq peoples, as well as contact resource people by contacting **David Perley**; Consultant Aboriginal Education, Department of Education, Educational Programs and Services Branch, Fredericton, #506-444-4659, david.perley@gnb.ca.

Mi'kmaq videotape series: contains six episodes, each 20-30 minutes long, dramatizing Mi'kmaq life in 1400, before the arrival of Europeans. Mi'kmaq with English or French overlays available.

A **resource book about Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Maliseet, Mi'kmaq and Abenaki Indians**. Prepared for and published by the Maine Indian Program. Copyright 1989 by the American Friends Service Committee.

Wolastoqewiyik [the people of the Wolastoq (St. John River)]

NeGoot-Gook

Maliseet Nation at Tobique

Tobique First Nation

13156 Rte 105

Tobique First Nation, NB

E7H 5M7

Tel: (506) 273- 5400

Fax: (506) 273-3035

Email: mfnat@nbnnet.nb.ca

Maliseet Nation at Woodstock

Woodstock First Nation

3 Wulastook Court

Woodstock, NB

E7M 4K6

Tel: (506) 328-3303

Fax: (506) 328-2420



<http://www.gnb.ca/0007/heritage/Programs/Fair2000>

Learn more about the Wabanaki Confederacy: www.geocities.com/bigorin/waba.htm

Wabanaki Resources and Activities: <http://www10.brinkster.com/wabanaki/default.html>

The **Atlantic Policy Congress of First Nation Chiefs Secretariat** aims to research, analyze and develop culturally relevant alternatives to federal policies that impact on the Mi'kmaq, Maliseet and Passamaquoddy First Nation communities and peoples. To find out more check out their website: <http://www.apcfc.ca/>

The **Mi'kmaq-Maliseet Institute** promotes the professional growth and self-determination of the First Nations through its programs, services and research. It is located on the UNB Campus. <http://www.unbf.ca/education/mmi/>

More information on the Mi'kmaq history, language and culture?

See the Mi'kmaq Resource Centre <http://mrc.uccb.ns.ca/>



ced by Falls Brook Centre
www.fallsbrookcentre.ca

Funding support for this project has been provided by the
Canadian International Development Agency.