

SINCE TIME IMMEMORIAL: TRIBAL SOVEREIGNTY IN WASHINGTON STATE

Newsletter: *On Sovereignty*, 1.1: Tribal Homelands/The First Nations of North America

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If you were born and raised in one town or city, then you would know it as your '**homeland**'. You would consider this your 'homeland' because this is where your school is, where your friends are, and where family works and plays.

But your homeland is much different than tribal people's homeland, and that is what you will be learning. The difference and what makes it different.

Long time ago, probably when your great, great, great, great grandparents were alive, people traveled to this country and knew there were other people already living here. The newcomers did not realize at first that the native tribes had societies just as organized as their own. There were more than 34 different nations. Each tribe had its own homeland and borders, so each also had its own government, laws, religion, economy, and traditions. Though tribes did not have passports when they wanted to travel to another tribal nation, like we have today when we want to visit other countries, there were rules that everyone was expected to follow and respect.

When non-Indian people got to this part of the land, they wanted to be able to live among the different tribes so they made promises and agreements with many of the tribes. The written agreements, known as a **treaties**, had everyone's signature on it to prove that they agreed to it. The tribal people in the agreement saved a part of their original homelands for themselves. These lands, much smaller than their original homelands, and in some cases, far away from their original homelands, are known as **reservations**.

When the United States signs a treaty with another nation, like England, France, or Canada, the treaty becomes the most important law of the land. In the US Constitution, it calls treaties "the supreme law of the land." Both the U.S. and the tribes know they are nations. And neither nation should ever break its treaty.

The tribal people gave up large parts of their original homelands in the agreements, but they wanted to continue to fish, hunt and gather their foods on the original homelands given to them by **The Creator**. Everyone agreed that tribes could continue their traditional fishing, hunting, and gathering on their original homelands, even if it was off their newly created reservations. Everyone accepted that tribes could continue the traditions they had kept since **time immemorial**, or since before the beginning of time.

This treaty also said the tribal people could continue speaking their own language, keep their own religions, keep their traditions and cultures and continue using their own tribal laws.

Today we know this as **tribal sovereignty**, and it allows today's tribal people the ability to continue their **lifeways**, or to live the way they want to. This might seem much like how your family lives in your own community, but there is an important difference. Since tribal people believe that **the Creator** (God) gave them this to live on, they also believe that The Creator's gift comes with their **sacred** promise and responsibility to take care of the land, its resources, and all its creatures. Tribes call this their **Covenant with the Creator**. Tribes believe that they need to make sure that these resources are not just here for them today, but for their great, great, great, great, great, great grandchildren, too. That means tribal people are looking 140 or more years into the future when making decisions on how to care for their people and their homelands!

We might think of a nation as being a lot bigger and maybe far across the sea. Each nation has different languages, religions, customs and holidays from our own and this difference sets us apart from them.

Some people find it hard to believe that such nations are right here in the United States. But they are here. In the Seattle area there are several tribal nations that made those same agreement with the United States.

There are the Suquamish, Snoqualmie, Spokane, Duwamish and many other tribes here in Washington State and each is a separate nation. Their nations may be much smaller than the United States, but still they have their **sovereign** lands and the responsibility to govern them.

But just like not all Canadians live in Canada, and not all Chinese live in China, there are many tribal people who choose to live off their reservations. For example, living in the large city of Spokane are many tribal people from many different tribes. Indians living in larger cities often call themselves **urban Indians**.

Tribal people who live in big cities work to create their own communities to keep their traditions alive, just like the many Asian and Pacific Islanders who formed Seattle's International District.

The tribal nations themselves also have their own museums and organizations to educate everyone, Indians and non-Indians, about their traditions, governments, and hopes for their futures. Find the tribes in your area and discover their history, traditions, and how their **tribal sovereignty** affects everyone in Washington State. Even you!

Questions:

1. What makes tribal homelands different from your own community, town, or city? (the sacred Covenant with the Creator)
2. Treaties are the most important, or _____, law of the land, according to the U.S. Constitution. (Supreme)
3. Tribes are guaranteed _____, or the ability to make their own laws, for their own governments, and practice their own traditions and lifeways. (tribal sovereignty)
4. Tribes gave up a lot of their homelands so that non-Indians could live here, too. Now, most tribal homelands are on _____. (reservations)
5. Tribes believe they were created here and have been here since the beginning of time, or since _____. (time immemorial)
6. Many Indians who live in cities call themselves _____. (urban Indians)
7. When tribes agreed to move to smaller reservations, they (circle one) **kept / gave up** their rights to hunt, fish, and gather on traditional hunting, fishing and gathering grounds that were off their reservations.
8. List the tribe(s) that live in your area:
9. True or False: The United States deals with tribes in Washington State much like they do with any foreign country. (True)

Sources:

LaCourse, Richard and Carol Craig. *Yakima Nation Review, Special Edition*. Toppenish, WA, Yakima Indian Nation, 1974.

Deloria, Jr. Vine and Clifford Lytle. *The Nations Within: The Past and Future of American Indian Sovereignty*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984.

Peterson, Jackie. *Sovereign to Sovereign*. Documentary Film. Washington State University, Vancouver, WA. 2005. The "Sovereign to Sovereign" lecture series takes its name from WSU Vancouver

professor Jackie Peterson's history documentary, which debuted in September at the Vancouver National Historic Reserve. A professor of history whose research focuses on Native American studies, Peterson is the writer, producer and co-director of the film, which describes the social and political significance of Lewis and Clark to American Indian cultures.

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