

**Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations  
Lands and Resources Secretariat**

**Cultural and Historical Significance of the  
Buffalo**

**March 13, 2012**









# Pre-contact

- **The buffalo has always been very significant in Plains Indian culture**
- **Social, cultural, spiritual, and economic significance**
- **Provided survival: clothing, shelter, medicines, and of course food**
- **Various forms of buffalo hunt: the pound, buffalo jump**



# Pre-contact

- **In most Plains bison hunting societies it was “necessary” that a good hunter have more than one wife**
- **The hunters’ success was the success of his wife and her family first and foremost**
- **The process of dressing the buffalo, the responsibility of the wife, was extensive**



# Pre-contact

- **In Plains societies once the buffalo was taken, it belonged to the wife**
- **A second or third set of hands was extremely helpful to processing the entire animal**
- **Benefits to having a good hunter for a husband were obvious – survival**



# Contact

- **Buffalo was an important trade item during the fur trade era, the gun and the horse served as advantageous tools at first**
- **Buffalo were required by the Europeans for survival in the harsh prairie climates**
- **European influence and subsequent exploitation of the lands and resources changed the fate of the buffalo**



# Contact

- **The introduction of the gun brought the decimation of the buffalo not long after contact on the prairies**
- **The railway lines prevented migration from the US**
- **American buffalo robe hunters were relentless**



# Treaty Period

- **The decimation of the buffalo was a driving force in the Treaty making process because it was the main source of food**
- **First Nations faced near “starvation” without the buffalo, replacing it in their diets with smaller game**





# Treaty Period

- **Determined the change in livelihood – move from hunting to agriculture**
- **Beginning of change in health factors and outcomes for First Nations people that is still being felt today**



# Treaty Period

- **During Treaty discussions, Chiefs such as Poundmaker insisted the buffalo hunt continue**
- **In early efforts of “conservation” and protection, other Chiefs such as Big Bear wanted to see the hunt restricted to the Indians only**



# Treaty Period

- **Both the Indians and the Crown knew the loss of the buffalo would change the Indian way of life forever.**
- **The Crown knew the buffalo were in the way of progress, as were the Indians**
- **The Crown perpetuated the change, the Indians did not welcome it**



# Modern Context

- **First Nations diets have changed significantly, survival techniques have changed**
- **There is almost no formal connection back to the historical and cultural significance of the buffalo in most First Nations communities**
- **Instead we use statements like “education is our buffalo”**



# Modern Context

- **Impacts of colonization have obliterated this once sacred relationship**
- **Restructured who we are as a people**
- **In many First Nations communities, hunters are becoming scarcer and hunting techniques have changed dramatically**





**Questions or Comments?**

