

Indigenous Languages in Canada

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WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

In recent decades, the revitalization of Indigenous languages has been identified as a human right, and the Canadian government has received Calls to Action to rectify the colonial harms caused to Indigenous languages. This fact sheet gives you current information about Indigenous languages in Canada and a list of ways in which you can help support them.

The importance of Indigenous languages for Indigenous peoples—and all Canadians

The identities, lives and futures of Indigenous peoples have been immeasurably affected by the forced removal of their languages. The efforts they are making to bring the languages back to life can have a huge, positive impact on individuals, families and communities.

Indigenous languages are also part of the shared history and national heritage of all Canadians. They hold the keys to irreplaceable, intelligent worldviews and intimate understandings about the environment, intergenerational education and Canada's history.

Our lands and species depend on these languages. They hold priceless insights into interspecies symbiosis and contain ecological knowledge.

Key facts about Indigenous languages in Canada

Indigenous language proficiency tends to be higher (44.9%) among those living in reserve communities compared with those living off reserve (13.4%). Living in an area with a high concentration of speakers may support language acquisition and use. Yet more than half of Indigenous peoples now live in urban areas of 30,000 or more. This means language support is needed everywhere in Canada, not only in on-reserve communities.

For Indigenous peoples who speak or are learning an Indigenous language as a second language, home is where they tend to speak it.

"The Nuučaanuł word for tree, sučas, literally is 'landholder.' Imagine if all the logging corporations changed the name for trees to 'landholders' in their documents, and talked about them and thought about them that way. They'd say, 'Oh yeah, we're just going to cut down all these landholders here and hope there's no landslides after!'"

- Gisele Martin, Nuu-chah-nulth language activist and Nuučaanuł learner

More facts about Indigenous languages in Canada today:



There are more than 70 Indigenous languages across 12 language groups currently spoken in Canada.



In 2016, an estimated 260,550 people were speaking their Indigenous language.




The overall number of Indigenous language speakers has grown by 3.1 percent in the last 10 years.



There are now twice as many Indigenous children as Elders who can speak an Indigenous language.



Among Indigenous people, 1 in 3 Elders and 1 in 10 children speaks an Indigenous language as their mother tongue.



Want to help? Try these ideas:



1. Learn the name of your town or city in the Indigenous language(s) of the region.



5. Push to rename streets and regions with Indigenous names and signage in consultation with local Indigenous language experts.

Tawnshi
Hello

2. Learn a greeting—and a response!—in the Indigenous language of your region and use it often.



6. Recognize Indigenous languages as living languages by identifying them in land acknowledgements. (For example, say: “Today, we are meeting on WSÁNEĆ land, the ancestral and unceded territory of SENĆOFEN-speaking people” or “We are gathered on the territories of the WSÁNEĆ people. The language Indigenous to this land is SENĆOFEN.”)



3. Incorporate Indigenous place names and greetings on posters and signs at your workplace.




4. Introduce the local Indigenous language(s) to your family, in your home and in your place of work. You can use resources like FirstVoices (www.firstvoices.com) or smartphone language apps. Try labelling household items in the local Indigenous language(s) as a fun learning aid, or purchase dual-language children’s books.



7. Advocate for Indigenous-led and regionally-relevant language instruction in schools for all Canadian children.

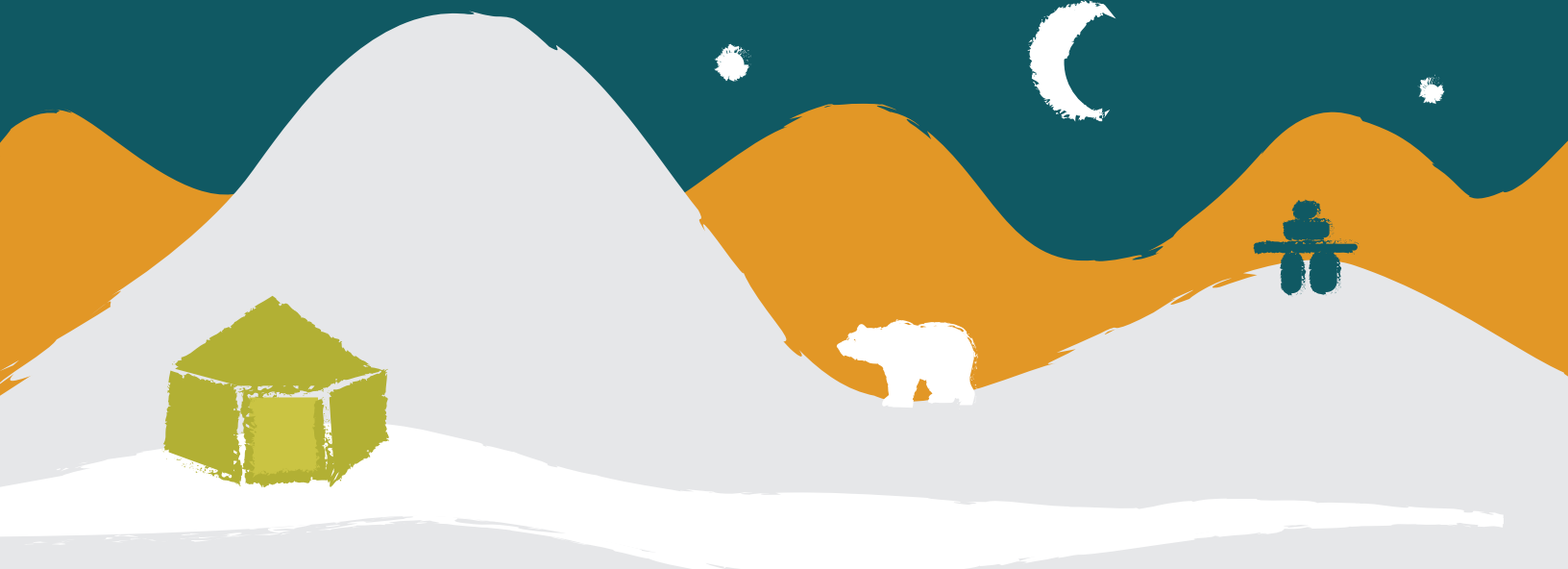


8. Publicly support and lobby for immersion programs run by Indigenous language groups across Canada from preschool to post-secondary.



Many Indigenous communities and cultural centres have language advisory councils, programs and/or instructors working to revive their languages. Ask how you can support their efforts.

9. Language revitalization efforts in Canada are extremely underfunded. Donate to or help establish language education initiatives.
10. Mobilize interest in the works of Indigenous language musicians, artists and filmmakers.
11. Support Indigenous-led research and networks to learn from and strengthen nation-wide language maintenance and revitalization efforts. This can be done through academic mentoring and support for Indigenous faculty positions focused on Indigenous language learning.
12. Encourage universities and colleges to create classes and programs in Indigenous languages.



National and International Support for Indigenous Languages and Cultures

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission

To address the legacy of residential schools and advance the process of Canadian reconciliation, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission put forth 94 Calls to Action. Of these, six are specific to language and culture. They range from asking the federal government to acknowledge that Aboriginal rights include Aboriginal language rights to calling upon post-secondary institutions to create university and college degree and diploma programs in Aboriginal languages.



The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)

A number of articles in UNDRIP pertain to Indigenous languages. For example, Article 13 states that:

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.
2. States shall take effective measures to ensure that this right is protected and also to ensure that Indigenous peoples can understand and be understood in political, legal and administrative proceedings, where necessary through the provision of interpretation or by other appropriate means.

Sources

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