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Innu (Montagnais-Naskapi)

The Innu (sometimes known as either Montagnais or Naskapi) are Aboriginal peoples located in the Subarctic and boreal areas of Québec and Labrador.



Naskapi Coat

The elaborate designs of this coat may reflect influences of European textiles (courtesy Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford).

The Innu (sometimes known as either Montagnais or Naskapi) are Aboriginal peoples located in the Subarctic and boreal areas of Québec and Labrador. They are Algonquian peoples closely related to the Cree in Northern Québec. The Innu inhabit a vast boreal territory on the Labrador Peninsula known as Nitassinan. Initially nomadic hunters, the growth and collapse of the European fur trade fundamentally altered the Innu way of life. In the mid-20th century, the federal government forced Innu communities into permanent settlements. As of 2014, the total registered Innu population is more than 22,000 with nearly 90 per cent living in Québec.

Innu (Montagnais-Naskapi) traditional territory.

(courtesy Victor Temprano/Native-Land.ca)

Communities

Innu, which means "people" in Innu-aimun, is the predominant demonym used to describe all Innu. Some groups maintain the use of one of two older terms, if only in a legal capacity. *Montagnais* (French for "mountain people") is usually applied to groups in forested, more southern communities, while *Naskapi* refers to far northern groups who inhabit the barren lands of the subarctic.

The Innu are distinct from but closely related to Eastern Cree groups that inhabit the western portion of the Labrador Peninsula. Though Innu were traditionally nomadic, contemporary communities are largely sedentary, the product of government policies to integrate Aboriginal peoples into the global economy through forced relocation. Groups are widely dispersed across a huge area of land. Many communities are remote, but relatively accessible. For example, Uashat and Mani-utenam are in and around Sept-Îles, Québec, along the north shore of the St. Lawrence. Others are far more remote, like the communities of Matimekush-Lac-John and Kawawachikamach around Schefferville, Québec, north of Labrador.

Communities in Québec include Pessamit, Kawawachikamach, Unamen Shipu, Essipit, Uashat mak Mani-utenam (the collective name for the two Sept-Îles communities), Mashteuiatsh, Ekuanitshit, Nutashkuan, Pakua Shipu, and Matimekush-Lac-John (Schefferville). The two largest Innu communities in Labrador are the Mushuau Innu in Natuashish and the Sheshatshiu Innu in Tshishe-shastshit. Two tribal councils represent Innu groups in Québec: Le Conseil Tribal Mamuitun (incorporated in 1991) represents Mashteuiatsh, Essipit, Pessamit, Uashat, Mani-utenam and Matimekush; while Mamit Innuat (founded in 1982, incorporated in 1988) represents Ekuanitshit, Nutashkuan, Pakua Shipu and Unamen Shipu. The Innu Nation represents the two Labrador communities. The Naskapi of Kawawachikamach practice self-government under the 1978 Northeastern Québec Agreement.

Language

The Innu language, Innu-aimun, is part of the Algonquian language family. Innu-aimun is spoken by people traditionally known as Montagnais, while Iyuw Iyimuun is a dialect spoken by the Naskapi. The language is widely spoken among communities and is supported by projects like the Innu Language Project, which promotes Innu language and culture through learning resources. In 2011, the National Household Survey reported that Innu-aimun had more than 11,000 speakers, while Iyuw Iyimuun had nearly 700. The two languages are similar, but variances in dialects and orthography exist. For instance, some communities may use syllabics, while others may use Latin script. Contemporary Innu communities are also largely fluent in either French or English.

Traditional Life

Innu traditionally hunted and fished across the vast boreal territory known as Nitassinan on the Labrador Peninsula. Innu hunted game animals like caribou in the eastern and northern areas, moose in the west, as well as beaver, bear, lake fish and salmon. They travelled in much the same way as their Algonquian relatives, utilizing the canoe in summer, and snowshoes and toboggans in winter. In addition, Innu lived in wigwams made of birchbark in the south and caribou hide in the north.

Traditional hunting techniques used every part of the caribou; craft makers decorated skins with painted or quill designs to make clothing of many kinds, or made drums for celebrations and sacred singing. The cracks and fissures in a burnt caribou shoulder blade were believed to foretell the location of game. Belief in animal spirits played a major role in the hunt. People gained status mainly through the ability to make gifts of meat to others. After the hunt, communities would hold a ceremonial feast (*makushan*) of caribou fat and bone marrow. The feast included drumming and songs sung to the animal spirits. Much of the ancestral religion is recorded in legends and songs.

In addition to hunting game, Innu fished for eels and fish, hunted seals, and gathered roots, berries and maple sap. They developed a pre-contact trade networks among Innu and other Aboriginal groups like the Wendat. Social groups revolved around the seasons. Several families would coalesce into winter hunting camps, while larger gatherings occurred in the summer, providing an opportunity for festivities and socializing.

Religion was a personal endeavour and encouraged the cultivation of respect for animals. The caribou was the most revered animal as it provided practically all the necessities of life. Shamans performed Shaking Tent rites, and hunters appeased animal spirits by placing offerings of bones and skulls in trees or on raised platforms.

Contact

The arrival of European traders, soldiers and missionaries drastically altered ways of life for the Innu. Early in the relationship, Christian texts were translated into Innu-aimun and missionaries became actively involved in Innu spiritual and cultural life. In the 18th century, missionaries in concert with community members helped to develop a standard orthography for Innu-aimun, in addition to their efforts to convert the population to Christianity. Many contemporary Innu communities retain these religious affiliations.

Although they briefly fought the Inuit, the Haudenosaunee, the Mi'kmaq and the Abenaki, the Innu were not a warlike group, and at least some hostility was a side effect of European contact. In the Tadoussac region the Innu were military allies of the French in their wars with the British and their Aboriginal allies (see Iroquois Wars). Champlain formed an alliance with a Montagnais group in 1603, laying a foundation for French-Aboriginal relations to come.

For two centuries the fur trade was the focus of Innu-European relations. Trade at posts in the Gulf of St. Lawrence were monopolies first of France and later Britain, and were leased to private traders. By the mid-19th century most areas were over-hunted, and the southern Innu needed assistance from missionaries and the government to survive. Soon commercial forestry increased their difficulties, and they were excluded from salmon rivers, which were leased by clubs and individuals.

Before the 19th century most contact between the northern Innu and Europeans was indirect, generally by trade through neighbouring Cree and southern Innu intermediaries. Life depended on the movements of the

barren-ground caribou. Starting in 1830, the Hudson's Bay Company opened posts in this northern region, supplied first from Fort Chimo and later from North West River, Labrador. The fur trade had disastrous results for the Innu because the trapping lifestyle did not allow the flexibility needed to follow nomadic caribou herds.

As with many Aboriginal Peoples during their early contact with Europeans, the Innu population was devastated by smallpox, the Spanish flu, tuberculosis, syphilis, scarlet fever, whooping cough, measles and other diseases. Also, large numbers of people died of starvation. The shift away from traditional subsistence models meant a reliance on the wage economy and government intervention. For some, this meant forced relocation to communities where social problems only worsened.

Though Innu were "settled" into communities, they were not party to any treaty negotiations, and were not recognized as having Aboriginal title to their lands.

Contemporary Life

Though strong pressures were placed on the Innu to abandon nomadic life, hunting and fishing remain important within their communities. In response to forced settlement, many Innu communities developed organizations to advocate for their Aboriginal rights. Beginning in the middle of the 20th century, the federal government forced Innu and Inuit to relocate to permanent settlements, which resulted in social and economic hardships.

In the early 1970s the Innu organized themselves politically with the Conseil Attikamek-Montagnais in Québec, and the Naskapi Montagnais Innu Association in Labrador. The NMIA negotiates land claims, education, healthcare and other social services. In 1990 they changed their name to the Innu Nation.

In 1975, the Innu Nation was excluded from the Agreement in Principle leading to the James Bay Agreement, but negotiated a separate agreement in 1978, known as the Northeastern Québec Agreement, which provided the Naskapi of Schefferville with some self-government concessions and \$9 million over 20 years in exchange for development rights. Today, the Innu Nation represents the Labrador Innu, while the Québec Innu are represented by Mamuitun and Mamit Innuat. The groups continue to press for settlement of their land claims and protection from the impact of forestry, hydroelectric dams, roads, and low-level military flights and mines, such as those in Voisey's Bay, Labrador.

Isolated communities have suffered from high rates of alcoholism, substance abuse and suicide. In 1993, the Innu of Davis Inlet (Utshimassits) attracted the attention of the world's press over a gas-sniffing epidemic. The children involved recovered but the incident was seen as representative of poor conditions in Aboriginal communities in Canada. In 2001, the Government of Canada, the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, and the Labrador Innu developed the Labrador Innu Comprehensive Healing Strategy to address some of the problems within the Innu communities. In 2002, approximately 680 people from Davis Inlet relocated to Natuashish, west of the original community. In 2008, Natuashish residents voted to ban alcohol on their reserve. (See Gas Sniffing in Labrador.)

In 2002, the Innu Nation successfully lobbied the federal government to be recognized as Status Indians, giving them access to various federal programs and services under the *Indian Act*. The communities of Natuashish and Sheshatshiu, both located in Newfoundland and Labrador, were established as reserves in 2003 and 2006 respectively.

Several programs support the survival of Innu cultural life. Nametau Innu, for example, is a project that aims to pass skills and traditional knowledge from elders to youth. The books of Montagnais author, An Antane Kapesh, and the Innu-language recordings by pop music duo Kashtin, show that Innu culture continues to adapt and even thrive. Since 1985, Uashat mak Mani-utenam has hosted a yearly summer festival of Aboriginal music, Innu Nikamu. Each year, more than 10,000 festival-goers celebrate and connect with traditional music and artists.

Since 2005, Tshiuetin Rail Transportation Inc., owned and operated by the Matimekush-Lac-John, Kawawachikamach and Uashat mak Mani-utenam communities, has provided a passenger rail link between Sept-Îles and Schefferville. Trains depart each location twice a week.

See also Aboriginal People: Subarctic and general articles under Aboriginal People.

Suggested Reading

P. Armitage, *The Innu (Montagnais-Naskapi)* (1991); G. Henriksen, *Hunters in the Barrens: The Naskapi on the Edge of the White Man's World* (1973); An Antane Kapesh, *Eukuan Nin Matshimanitu Innu-Iskueu [Je Suis une Maudite Sauvagesse]* (Montagnais and French; 1976); F. G. Speck, *Naskapi, the Savage Hunters of the Labrador Peninsula* (1977); Marie Wadden, *Nitassinan: The Innu Struggle to Reclaim Their Homeland* (1991).
Edward S. Rogers and Eleanor Leacock, "Montagnais-Naskapi," in *Handbook of North American Indians: Subarctic*, vol. 6, ed. by June Helm (Smithsonian Institution, 1981).