

Activity 8: Treaties – The Ethical Dimension

Indigenous treaties in Canada are constitutionally recognized agreements between the Crown and Indigenous peoples. They form the constitutional and moral basis of alliances between Indigenous peoples and settler governments, both British and Canadian. However, the terms of treaties have been understood differently by the parties involved. This difference in interpretation is rooted in differing worldviews, with distinct concepts of land ownership. Most agreements describe exchanges where Indigenous nations agree to share access to ancestral lands in return for various payments and promises. On a deeper level, treaties are sometimes understood, particularly by Indigenous people, as sacred covenants between nations that establish a relationship between those for whom Canada is an ancient homeland and those whose family roots lie in other countries. Indigenous groups have made treaties since time immemorial, and those treaties often included relationships that humans shared with non-human beings, including animals and the environment.

The Two Row Wampum (Kaswentha) records the agreement made in 1613 between the Haudenosaunee and the Dutch. Both sides agreed to respect each other's cultures and to never interfere in each other's affairs



Iroquois Chiefs from the Six Nations Reserve reading Wampum belts in Brantford, Ontario, 1871 (courtesy Library and Archives Canada/Electric Studio/C-085137).



Plan of parts of Ontario and Québec showing the lands affected by the Robinson Treaty and Treaty no. 3, along with the unsundered land, 1901 (courtesy Library and Archives Canada/235225-1).

In the activity below, focus on **the ethical dimension** of history. Treaties are a meaningful element of Indigenous history in Canada, and we can learn much from studying them, including an ability to better understand and address the complexities and ethics of ongoing negotiations today.

Investigate a historical treaty by visiting the “Treaties” category on the **Indigenous Peoples Collection** on The Canadian Encyclopedia, or select one discussed in the **Treaties with Indigenous Peoples in Canada** article.

In small groups, answer the following questions:

- » When and where was the treaty signed?
- » What is the historical context of the treaty? (What was happening at the time? What were the motivating factors for the various groups involved? What were the goals of the government? What were the goals of Indigenous signatories? You may have to do further research.)
- » What were the key terms of the treaty?
- » What were the direct consequences for the different parties involved in the treaty signing?
- » Make an ethical judgment on the fairness of your selected treaty: Do you think it was just? Why or why not?

Use the following criteria to assess the treaty’s fairness:

Did one or both parties sign willingly and unforced, free from violence or duress?

Did one or both parties fully understand the terms?

Was there any intentional deception or exaggeration of the facts?

Visit the **Treaties in Canada Education Guide** on the **Historica Canada Education Portal** and watch the **Naskumituwin (Treaty)** Heritage Minute.

Create a rough timeline of the treaties discussed in the video.