

Crossing Cultural Boundaries

First Nations communities are not anti-resource development, but they wish to see it undertaken responsibly.

They wish to be part of the development process and to share in the benefits which accrue. These views were expressed by Andy Yesno of the Eabametoong First Nation at a cross-cultural awareness workshop, which he recently ran for De Beers in Sudbury.

The purpose of the workshop was to give exploration employees a better understanding of the historical, cultural and political issues which influence the response of Aboriginal peoples to present day situations.

The workshop covered a range of subjects such as art, language, the role of elders and traditional practices. For instance, Aboriginal art expresses the spiritual beliefs and reflects the heritage of the First Nations, as well as recording scenes from legends.



Aboriginal people view the world (earth/land, sea/water, sky/wind, mankind/wildlife) as being interrelated and tend to take a broader, more holistic view of life than most non-aboriginal people.

Until quite recently, when missionaries invented the syllabic alphabet, aboriginal languages were not written. Aboriginal people have a very rich oral history and many are skilled storytellers who can keep an audience spellbound with historical tales, legends and mythology. They are a visual people who like things to be explained with the use of pictures.

First Nation Facts

- ◆ There are approximately 660 First Nations in Canada
- ◆ There are approximately 800,000 "status Indians" in Canada
- ◆ There are approximately 1.2 million Aboriginal people in Canada
- ◆ In most First Nation communities, over 70% of the population is aged less than 25
- ◆ Few First Nation communities have a resident doctor.

Aboriginal people have a very strong affiliation with the land, which has provided them directly with food, clothing, medicine and spiritual nourishment. In Aboriginal culture there are four sacred plants; sage, sweet-grass, cedar and tobacco. There are many traditions around these, such as making a small gift of tobacco to an elder as a "thank you" at the start of a ceremony or meeting. An exchange of small gifts is often undertaken as a sign of respect.

Elders are highly respected in aboriginal communities as the repository of collective knowledge, wisdom and spiritual learning. Traditional Knowledge is highly valued and embraces not only knowledge of wildlife and medicines, but also survival on the land.

Within many tribes, certain families had specific talents such as hunting, fishing, spiritual guidance, medicine or the interpretation of dreams. This is often reflected in the family names. Groups of families formed clans, and several clans grouped together to form First Nations communities. Aboriginal people lived off the land and were itinerant hunter-gatherers until quite recently. The move to reserves happened long after their first contact with the white people.

Insight into these issues is very valuable as our work impacts on many First Nations communities. Increasing our understanding and appreciation of the differences between our cultures and how we can best respond to them, encourages more productive relationships.