

Background Information about American Indians

1. Today there are many terms that describe the people who first inhabited this land. There is conflict about what to call these people. Part of the problem is that they are not one people, but many. Traditional names translated from their native languages generally mean “the People.” Yet, they are called Native Americans, American Indians, First People, aboriginal, Indigenous People, and by the very general term Indian. The word “Indian” is wrongly used, in its application as a term, which collectively designates tribal groups as “one people.” Christopher Columbus’ erroneous geography and impression that he had landed among the islands off Asia led him to call the peoples he met “los Indios.” His casual use of the term “Indios” in his letters introduced the New World to European populations; thus, similar words in other European languages evolved, such as the French “Indien,” the German “Indianer,” the English “Indian.” Subsequent usage of the term “Indian” for the New World’s inhabitants evoked descriptive words as “savages,” “infidels,” and “heathens.” Prior to Columbus’ arrival on this continent, Europeans had had limited contact with groups of people who had such diverse cultures and languages. Initial establishment of the imagery of the “Indian,” like the word itself, came from the pens of Columbus and Amerigo Vespucci. Such imagery and stereotypes have prevailed to the present through inaccurate written accounts and Hollywood movies.
2. Each Indian tribe has its own language, which is different from those of other tribes; its own history and origins; its own customs (social and spiritual); its own traditional dances; its own styles of clothing; its own foods; its own values; its own culture; its own spiritual beliefs and practices; its own lifestyles; and its own tribal governments. Most tribes also have an extended family system.
3. Indian tribes are not one people, although many tribal philosophies and concepts are similar – e.g., nearly every tribe’s beliefs have reference to a Supreme Being; refer to the earth as “Mother Earth” and sky as “Father Sky”; have a belief that all things in creation must have balance and harmony; and have respect for all animals, sea life, and birds, and for all things.
4. There were 560 federally recognized Indian tribes and bands, as of January 2000, in the forty-eight mainlands United States of America. Alaska has the Aleuts, Eskimos and Athapascan tribal groups that number 229. But there are perhaps 300 more Native Entities in Alaska, which, while eligible to receive services, are not federally recognized as tribes/nations. Indian tribal groups also exist in Canada, Mexico, Central America, and South America. Diseases that the Europeans brought mostly destroyed tribes of the Caribbean, and the remaining Caribbean tribal peoples intermarried with the French, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, and black slaves.
5. There are 378 treaties, which the U.S. government entered into with Indian tribes, the first being the treaty with the Delawares (September 17, 1778) and the last the agreement with the Columbia and Colville (July 7, 1883).
6. There are 292 reservations, rancherias, and pueblos. These land areas are held in trust under the United States Department of Interior.
7. Today there are many new findings about the Indians. Science is linking peoples and their migrations as far away as Siberia. Someday these links to the past may open up explorations of where the native peoples really came from. Does the theory regarding the Bering Strait link peoples of two continents? Do the glaciers of Alaska hold secrets? What about connections with the people of South America? We are now in the process of interweaving cultures, people, and evidence that in the near future might establish these connections.