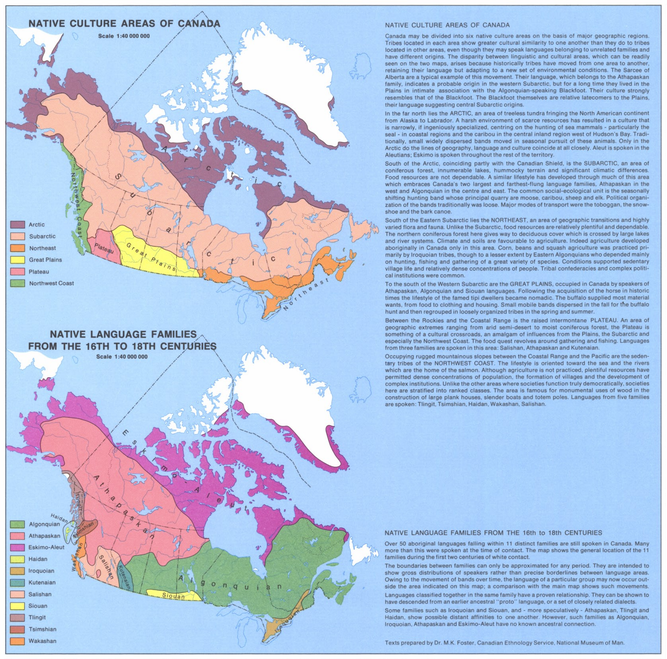


NATIVE CULTURE AREAS OF CANADA

Canada may be divided into six native culture areas on the basis of major geographic regions. Tribes located in each area show greater cultural similarity to one another than they do to tribes located in other areas, even though they may speak languages belonging to unrelated families and have different origins. The disparity between linguistic and cultural areas, which can be readily seen on the two maps, arises because historically tribes have moved from one area to another, retaining their language but adapting to a new set of environmental conditions. The Sarcee of Alberta are a typical example of this movement. Their language, which belongs to the Athapaskan family, indicates a probable origin in the western Subarctic, but for a long time they lived in the Plains in intimate association with the Algonquian-speaking Blackfoot. Their culture strongly resembles that of the Blackfoot. The Blackfoot themselves are relative latecomers to the Plains, their language suggesting central Subarctic origins.

In the far north lies the ARCTIC, an area of treeless tundra fringing the North American continent from Alaska to Labrador. A harsh environment of scarce resources has resulted in a culture that is narrowly, if ingeniously specialized, centring on the hunting of sea mammals - particularly the seal - in coastal regions and the caribou in the central inland region west of Hudson's Bay. Traditionally, small widely dispersed bands moved in seasonal pursuit of these animals. Only in the Arctic do the lines of geography, language and culture coincide at all closely. Aleut is spoken in the Aleutians; Eskimo is spoken throughout the rest of the territory.

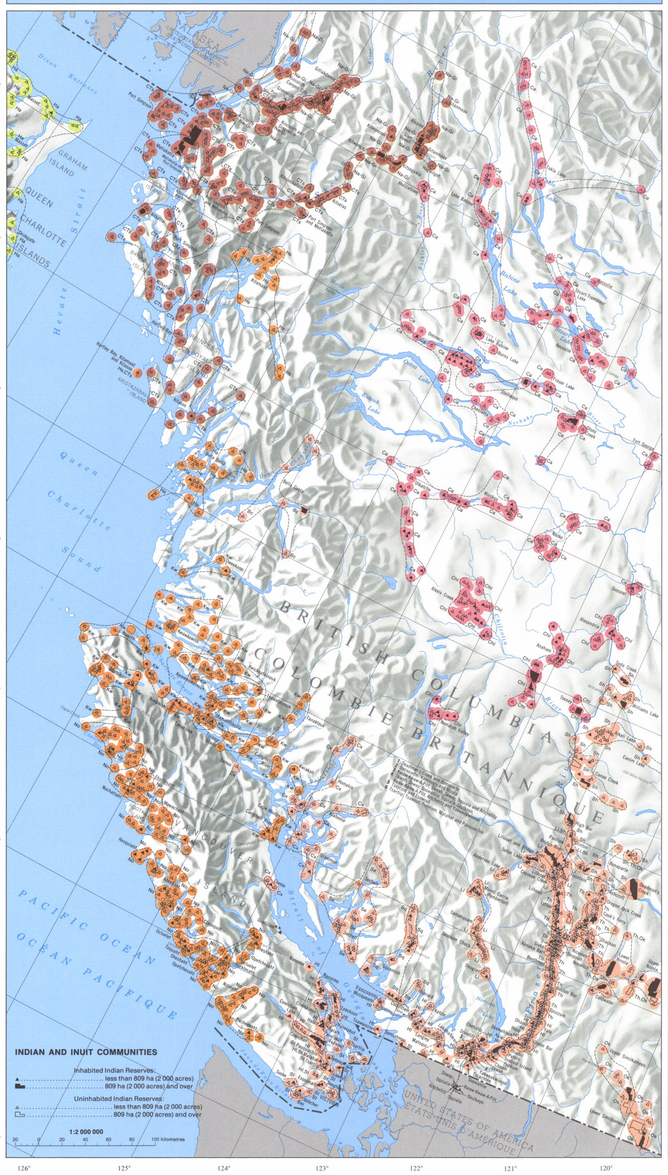
South of the Arctic, coinciding partly with the Canadian Shield, is the SUBARCTIC, an area of coniferous forest, innumerable lakes, hummocky terrain and significant climatic differences. Food resources are not dependable. A similar lifestyle has developed through much of this area which embraces Canada's two largest and farthest-flung language families, Athapaskan in the west and Algonquian in the centre and east. The common social-ecological unit is the seasonally shifting hunting band whose principal quarry are moose, caribou, sheep and elk. Political organization of the bands traditionally was loose. Major modes of transport were the toboggan, the snowshoe and the bark canoe.

South of the Eastern Subarctic lies the NORTHEAST, an area of geographic transitions and highly varied flora and fauna. Unlike the Subarctic, food resources are relatively plentiful and dependable. The northern coniferous forest here gives way to deciduous cover which is crossed by large lakes and river systems. Climate and soils are favourable to agriculture. Indeed agriculture developed aboriginally in Canada only in this area. Corn, beans and squash agriculture was practiced primarily by Iroquoian tribes, though to a lesser extent by Eastern Algonquians who depended mainly on hunting, fishing and gathering of a great variety of species. Conditions supported sedentary village life and relatively dense concentrations of people. Tribal confederacies and complex political institutions were common.

To the south of the Western Subarctic are the GREAT PLAINS, occupied in Canada by speakers of Athapaskan, Algonquian and Siouan languages. Following the acquisition of the horse in historic times the lifestyle of the famed tipi dwellers became nomadic. The buffalo supplied most material wants, from food to clothing and housing. Small mobile bands dispersed in the fall for the buffalo hunt and then regrouped in loosely organized tribes in the spring and summer.

Between the Rockies and the Coastal Range is the raised intermontane PLATEAU. An area of geographic extremes ranging from arid semi-desert to moist coniferous forest, the Plateau is something of a cultural crossroads, an amalgam of influences from the Plains, the Subarctic and especially the Northwest Coast. The food quest revolves around gathering and fishing. Languages from three families are spoken in this area: Salishan, Athapaskan and Kutenaian.

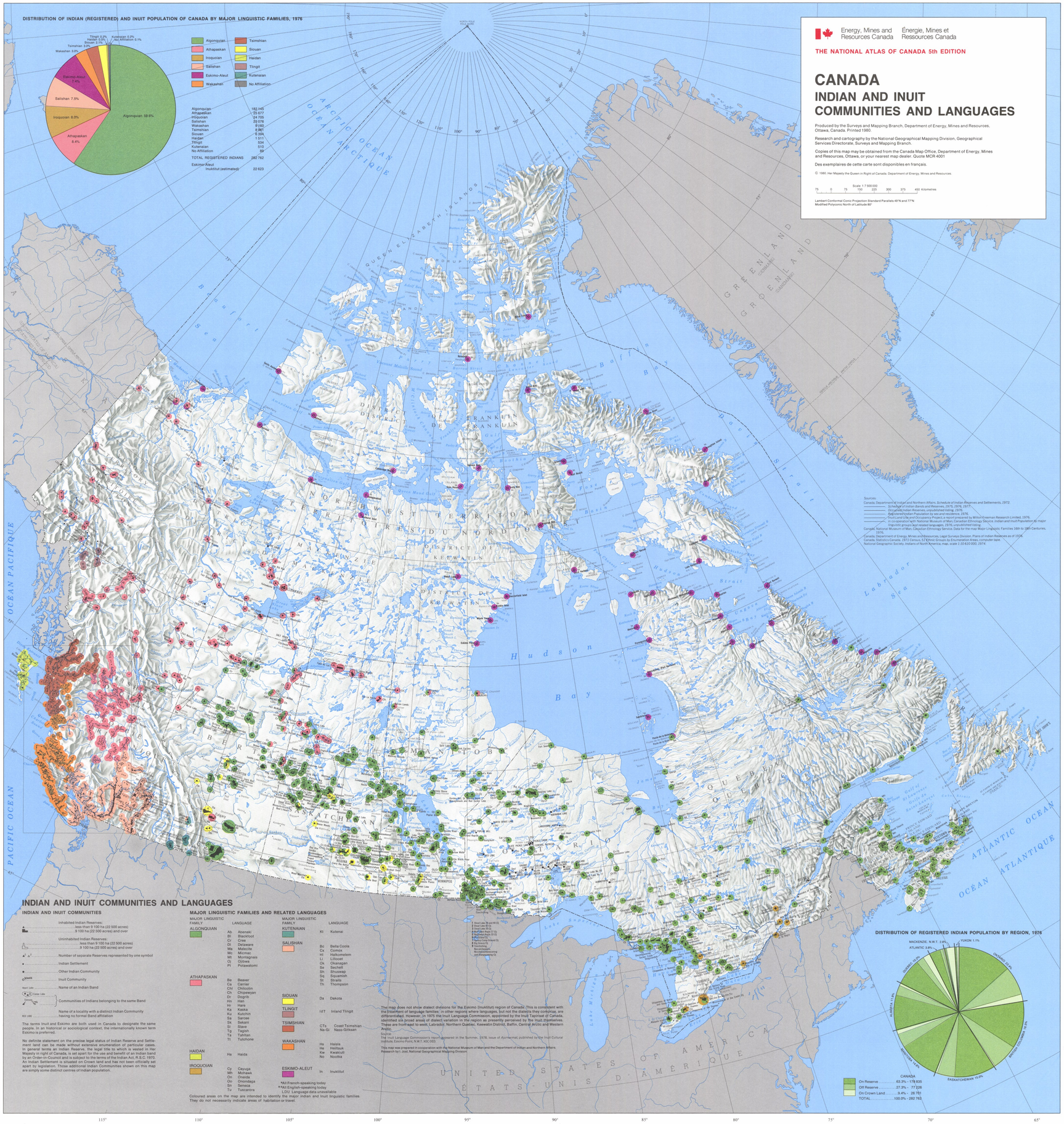
Occupying rugged mountainous slopes between the Coastal Range and the Pacific are the sedentary tribes of the NORTHWEST COAST. The lifestyle is oriented toward the sea and the rivers which are the home of the salmon. Although agriculture is not practiced, plentiful resources have permitted dense concentrations of population, the formation of villages and the development of complex institutions. Unlike the other areas where societies function truly democratically, societies here are stratified into ranked classes. The area is famous for monumental uses of wood in the construction of large plank houses, slender boats and totem poles. Languages from five families are spoken: Tlingit, Tsimshian, Haidan, Wakashan, Salishan.



NATIVE LANGUAGE FAMILIES FROM THE 16th to 18th CENTURIES

Over 50 aboriginal languages falling within 11 distinct families are still spoken in Canada. Many more than this were spoken at the time of contact. The map shows the general location of the 11 families during the first two centuries of white contact.

The boundaries between families can only be approximated for any period. They are intended to show gross distributions of speakers rather than precise borderlines between language areas. Owing to the movement of bands over time, the language of a particular group may now occur outside the area indicated on this map: a comparison with the main map shows such movements. Languages classified together in the same family have a proven relationship. They can be shown to have descended from an earlier ancestral "proto" language, or a set of closely related dialects.

Some families such as Iroquoian and Siouan, and - more speculatively - Athapaskan, Tlingit and Haidan, show possible distant affinities to one another. However, such families as Algonquian, Iroquoian, Athapaskan and Eskimo-Aleut have no known ancestral connection.

Texts prepared by Dr. M.K. Foster, Canadian Ethnology Service, National Museum of Man.