

COMMON QUESTIONS

Visitors to Nez Perce Country often have many questions about the Nimiipu, the Nez Perce. Stereotypes and misconceptions often cause confusion. Here are answers to some of the most commonly asked questions about the Nez Perce people.

How many Nez Perce are there? There are about 3100 people enrolled with the Nez Perce Tribe in Idaho. Of those, about 1800 live within the reservation boundaries. Several hundred Nez Perce live on the Colville Reservation in eastern Washington and the Umatilla Reservation in Oregon. About 100 people of Nez Perce descent live in Canada and a remnant in Oklahoma. The dispersed population is a direct outcome of the 1877 War in which the U.S. Army pursued and fought the bands of the Nez Perce for five months.

Have the Nez Perce retained their native language? Today, only about 100 Nez Perce speak their language fluently. After the War of 1877, there were numerous attempts to extinguish traditional Indian cultures and to replace them with Euro-American ways. Today, young people are learning the language at home, through the HeadStart program and after school programs. The Nez Perce Tribe offers a class for it's employees. Area colleges offer Nez Perce language courses, and computer programs and adult study groups help students learn at their own pace. Néz Perce is one of the more complex languages to learn, and includes many sounds not used in English.

Because language is the expression of culture, it reflects the essence of this people. For instance, there are over 180 names for various family relationships. The emphasis still remains on the family. Traditional songs, stories, and music are also reservoirs of the language.

How is tribal membership recognized? Those born of at least ¼ Nez Perce blood can enroll as a member of the Tribe, regardless of place of residency. Tribal members who also live within the reservation boundaries stated in the 1855 Treaty have voting rights, and are members of the Tribe's general council. In order to be elected to the Nez Perce Tribal Executive Council (NPTEC), one must have ¼ Nez Perce blood and reside within the reservation boundaries stated by the 1863 Treaty.

Nimiipu, pronounced 'nee-MEE-poo', is what the people called themselves. It means The People.

Nez Percé is what the French trappers called the people, and is now pronounced 'nez purse'.

Who determines tribal policies and laws? The Nez Perce Tribal Executive Committee is an elected board of nine members which represents the tribe. The Nez Perce Tribe is a federally recognized tribe, with the legal authority of a sovereign nation. Through the decisions of the voting membership/general council, the tribe has the right to choose a form of government, create its own constitution, make its own laws, determine the use of tribal property and resources, tax property and resource use, determine membership, govern the conduct of members and non-members within reservation boundaries, and exercise the many rights of an independent government.

Did Chief Joseph lead all the Nez Perce during the 1877 War? Traditionally, loosely organized bands of Nez Perce each had several leaders or headmen, who were respected for their knowledge in specific areas. The leaders often met in councils to debate issues and make decisions for the good of the band.

During the 1870's, the Wallowa band of Nez Perce had several leaders, including Young Joseph, a strong civil leader, and his brother Ollokot, a skilled war leader. The other non-treaty bands had similar leadership organizations. When the five non-treaty bands joined forces during the War of 1877, all of the headmen of all of the bands met. The historical record makes it clear that there were several experienced leaders seeking agreement, not a single leader who dictated actions. Those successful and skilled in battle would have taken the lead in developing battle strategies.

By the time the Nez Perce agreed to stop fighting at Bear Paw, or Snake Creek, Young Joseph was one of the few headmen remaining. The other leaders had either been killed or had escaped to Canada. Joseph fulfilled his duties as a civil leader by remaining with those who could not escape. Federal officials and the media didn't understand the autonomy of the different bands, nor the council style of tribal leadership. Because of not only his great oratory skills, but also because Joseph stayed with the people, most non-Indians incorrectly assumed he was the only leader of the Nez Perce.

Why are there so many non-Indians living on the Nez Perce Reservation?

Although the boundaries of the reservation include 784,999 acres, only about 10% is now owned by the tribe or tribal members. Most of the land passed into non-Indian hands after the Dawes Allotment Act of 1887 was passed. The act, which affected most reservations nation-wide, assigned up to 160 acres of reservation land to each adult American Indian, and up to 80 acres to each child. Often, the sections assigned were not contiguous, so a single family might have claim to widely separated plots. This act was designed to break up traditional family life and "assimilate" Indian people into mainstream America. Lands not immediately assigned were sold to settlers and miners, or assigned to them under the Homestead Act. Since many settlers were already illegally residing on western reservations, the Allotment and Homestead Acts merely legalized their presence.

The allotment process was carried out on the Nez Perce Reservation between 1889 and 1893, putting more than 70% of the reservation into non-Indian hands. While a few Nez Perce families adapted to ranching and farming lifestyles, most preferred the traditional hunting and gathering lifestyle and economy. The concept of owning a defined block of land, the idea that a piece of paper written in English represented land ownership, and farming as a way of life was foreign to most Nez Perce. Some saw little reason to trust the government officials in the land allotment process. Some sold the deeds for their allotments to non-Indian farmers, further depleting

the tribal land base. Today, the Tribe is working to purchase available lands on the reservation.

Do treaties give special rights to the Nez Perce or other American Indian Tribes?

No. By definition, treaties are legal contracts between sovereign nations; they spell out and formalize the rights and properties already held by each party. For example, the Treaty of 1855 formally states the rights of the Nez Perce to "fish in all the usual and accustomed places and to hunt and gather on open and unclaimed lands outside of the reservation." The United States government agreed that this was the right of the Tribe based on pre-existing land use, not a new or special privilege. In 1863 another treaty was imposed which did not abrogate or remove this right.



Is religion as important today as in times past?

To most, yes, and as with everything it has taken different forms and shapes. Religion or spirituality cannot be underestimated. Just as the first missionaries discovered, this aspect of Nez Perce people still plays a large hand in all affairs. Contrary to the idea of separation of church and state, the Nez Perce have not separated life into these

categories. Social and religious customs determine much of what happens in the political and economic arenas. Spirituality is still expressed in art, music, dance; in the longhouse, and in the church; on the mountain tops, and in the sweathouses, and with the pipe. Spirituality and spiritual symbolism prevails at birth and death.

Regardless of how the Nez Perce express their spirituality and beliefs, they all have one common bond through Coyote, or *Itsaya'ya*. Containing all the characteristics of humans--frailties, humor, egocentric passions, and so on, he still created the people, visited the after-world, and performed many other supernatural feats. Coyote is the true depiction of Nez Perce perspective.

Do traditional customs still prevail in the contemporary life of the Nez Perce?

Some of the old customs are very prevalent today as Nez Perce live much like the rest of America. Although people are busy with work, school, and the activities related to small, rural communities, there are those who practice the arts, the religion, and music of many generations past. Some of the old customs are not recognized because they are blended with contemporary life-ways which can be seen particularly in sporting events of all kinds. Taking high priority with Indian communities, they require physical fitness and aptitude along with a competitive spirit.

Celebrations and ceremonies are held throughout the year along with the seasonal root feasts. It is at places like this that tribal bonds are formed through the food, the songs, the dances and all the customs. Traveling to pow wows, sporting tournaments, and various conferences keeps inter-tribal relations alive. The blending of the old and the new can readily be seen in the formalization of the Nez Perce Appaloosa Horse Club, and other horse-related organizations. This resurgence of the horse culture also shows the effort to continue traditional customs amidst a fast-changing world.