

First Nations Trade, Specialization and Market Institutions

A Historical Survey of First Nation Market Culture

Executive Summary

A market is where voluntary and efficient exchange between a buyer and a seller takes place and this exchange is facilitated by some informal and/or formal rules and infrastructure. In section 1 of this paper we use anecdotes drawn from modern and historical markets to list six identifiable characteristics of market cultures:

- Specialization in production
- Trading networks (exports and imports)
- Public Infrastructure to support trade
- Commercial laws, standards, and dispute resolution processes
- Mediums of exchange
- Property Rights

We were able to identify all these market characteristics among First Nations within the Americas in both pre-contact and early contact periods. Our evidence is summarized in section 2 of this paper and a somewhat comprehensive Expanded Historical Reference Appendix.

Although certainly not an exhaustive survey of the evidence, this paper did identify 27 examples of specialization and trading networks among most First Nations in the Americas. We presented four pieces of evidence of First Nation public infrastructure one of which dates back 5000 years in Norte Chico, Peru that may represent the first instance of modern government in the World. We describe the Aztec commercial, legal and property right system and the Iroquois Great Law and illustrate four other types of commercial standards related to language and measurement. Four First Nation



mediums of exchange from across Canada and three individual property rights systems are presented.

In section 3, we conclude that many First Nations had a market culture. We suggest that First Nations in Canada were legislated out of markets beginning in the 1870s.

This paper concludes by hoping our research will (a) help inspire more research into the history of First Nation markets and their disappearance, (b) dispel the myth that markets are foreign to First Nations, and (c) dispel the myth that First Nations should eschew a market orientated agenda because of cultural or historical reasons.

