

# the project

Why Treaties Matter began when the partnership of the Minnesota Indian Affairs Council, Minnesota Humanities Center, and the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian was approved by tribes residing in Minnesota.

The exhibit was created through a community-based approach. Since its inception, the knowledge, insight, and perspective of tribal members have been the exhibit's foundation.

From this foundation emerged a vehicle for authentic Dakota and Ojibwe voices upon which these communities tell their own stories of sovereignty, adaptability, and sustainability.



This is a such a wonderful exhibit for non-Native Americans to be exposed to the Native American's history, cultural values of the land/its people and relationship Mother Earth, and why treaties matter in today's American society.

—Brian Xiong, Chief Diversity Officer, Minnesota State Community & Technical College

For many visitors, both American Indian and those from other backgrounds, Why Treaties Matter was their first entry point into beginning to learn about the history of treaties in Minnesota.

—Native American Community Development Institute, Minneapolis

I learned a lot about the Dakota and Ojibwe's past and how they were impacted by the settlers coming here, not just how the settlers were impacted by them. I also learned about Dakota and Ojibwe people's traditions and culture, and how they interpret the world.

—9th grade student, Eden Prairie High School, Eden Prairie

# did you know?

## What is a treaty?

Treaties are agreements between self-governing, or sovereign, nations. Native Nations existed long before the formation of the United States. European powers recognized the sovereign status of Native Nations when they made treaties with us, as did the United States. Article I, Section 8 of the U.S. Constitution.

Kevin Leecy, Bois Forte Band of Ojibwe Chairman, Minnesota Indian Affairs Council Chairman

## I don't understand why American Indians have rights different from anyone else. Do treaties grant "special rights"?

Treaties, affirmed in courts, have not given, but retained for native people the right to hunt, fish, and gather as they have for hundreds of years. These rights are often called usufructuary rights, which is just a legal term for the right to use something.

You can sell a piece of land, but retain the right to use the dock. You can have an easement put in place where two neighbors share the same driveway. This concept was written right into the treaties between native tribes and the U.S. government.

Dr. Anton Treuer, Professor of Ojibwe, Bemidji State University

## What's the benefit of learning about these treaties?

The history of American Indian treaties is the history of all Minnesotans and all Americans. Even now, states, Native Nations, and the federal government continue to engage on a government-to-government basis every day, making in effect new treaties, building upon those made many years ago.

We cannot have a complete understanding of what it means to be Americans without knowing about these relationships, whether we are Native Americans or not.

Kevin Gover, Director, Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian



## How are treaties exercised now?

For Native Americans, treaties stipulate the basis upon which their sovereignty rests. The right of their tribes to have their own governments is very much tied up in treaties that define their lands and their history of interactions with the U.S. government.

Dr. Anton Treuer, Professor of Ojibwe, Bemidji State University

## Indians were already given reservations, and all this occurred a long time ago. Why are you still talking about this?

This is a misunderstanding. The Dakotas [and Ojibwe] were not given anything. I always try to explain it like this: What do you do when you want to save a room at a hotel? You make a reservation for it and it's reserved for yourself.

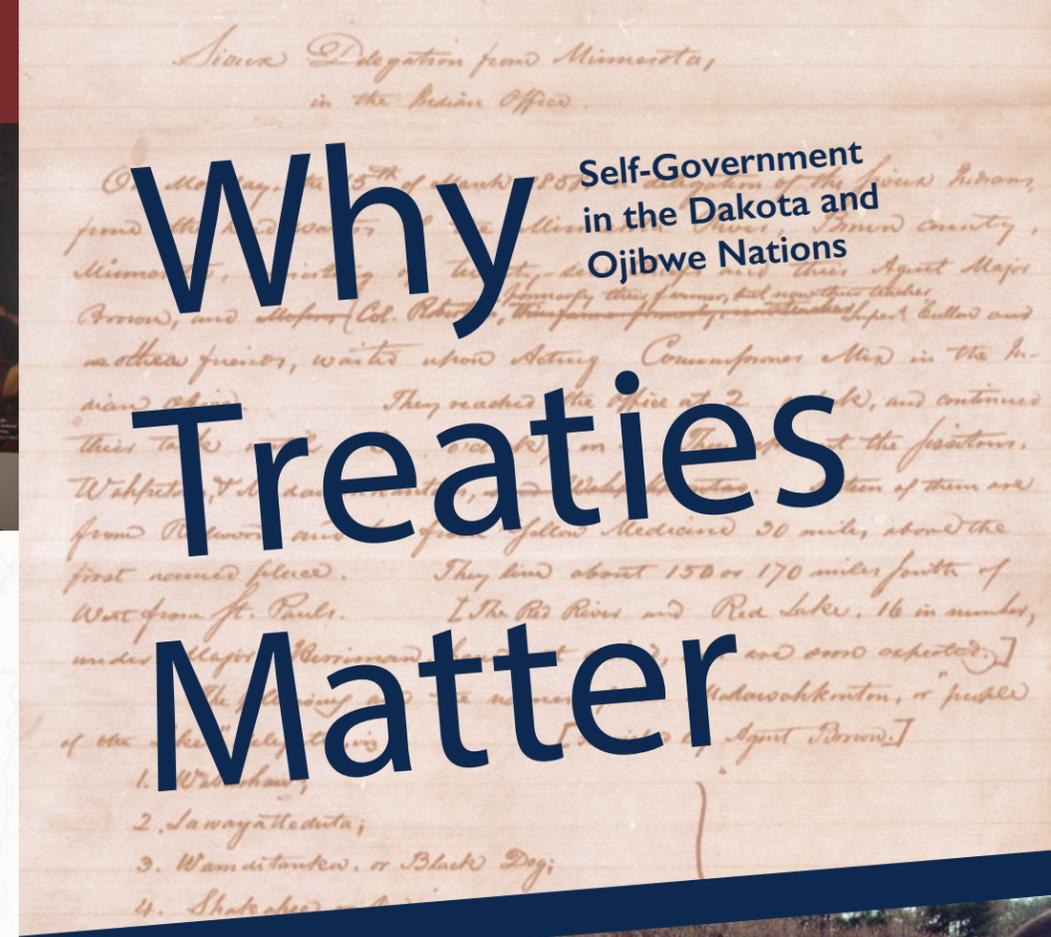
Well, the Dakota did that in the treaty-making process. They were able to reserve some portions of land for themselves, albeit probably not the best for their existence, but it was still reserved by the Dakotas for that purpose.

It was never given. How could the U.S. government give something that they did not own to a people that was already giving up so much? Reservations weren't given to Indian people. They were reserved by Indian peoples for themselves.

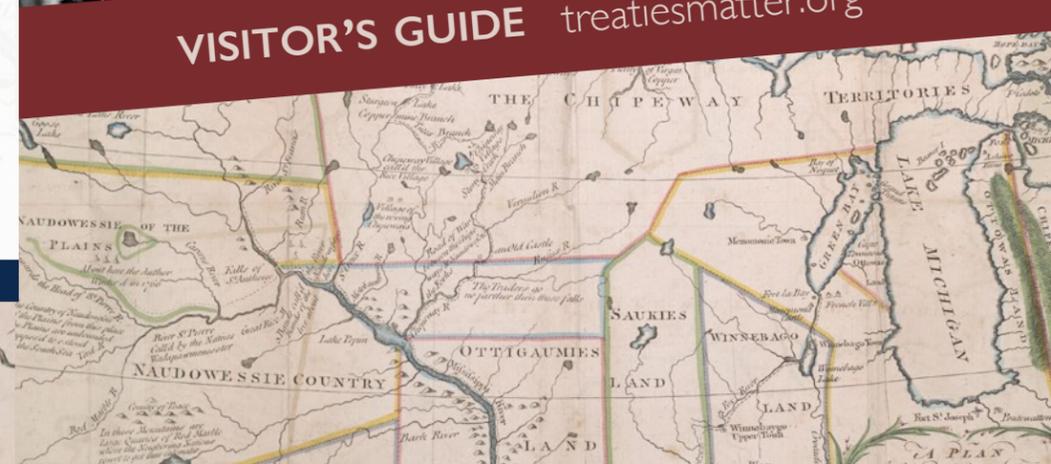
Dallas Ross, Upper Sioux Community

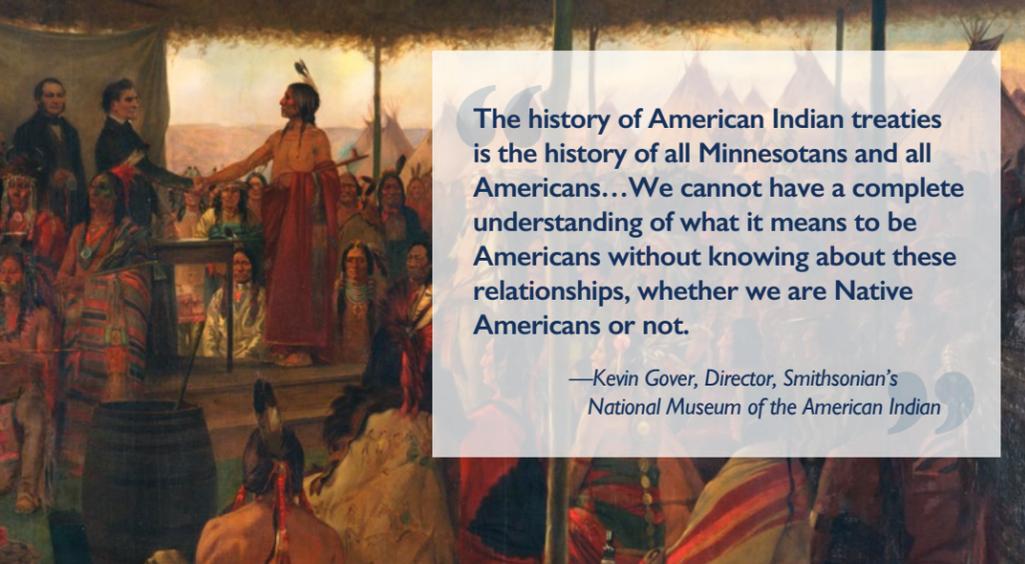
# Why Treaties Matter

Self-Government in the Dakota and Ojibwe Nations



VISITOR'S GUIDE [treatiesmatter.org](http://treatiesmatter.org)



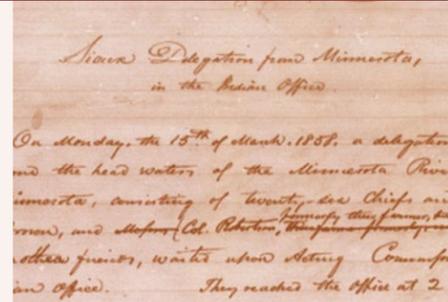


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# treaties

The treaties by which Dakota and Ojibwe ceded—and retained—rights to land and resources are vital to Minnesota history. Peace and trade treaties were also signed among the U.S., Ojibwe, and Dakota. These treaties represent the hard choices tribes were forced to make between resistance and accommodation.



Insisting that land was just a thing to be bought, sold, and owned, these treaties offered American Indians a narrow range of options: move, assimilate, or perish. This rendered Dakota and Ojibwe, and their relationship to land, invisible.



Tribal nations' trauma for survival is often dismissed in public discourse and classrooms.

# tribal nations

Two distinct tribes exist in this place now called Minnesota: Dakota and Ojibwe.

DAKOTA	 Lower Sioux Indian Community	 Prairie Island Indian Community	 Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community	 Upper Sioux Community
OJIBWE	 Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe	 White Earth Nation	 Red Lake Nation	 Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe
	 Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa	 Bois Forte Band of Chippewa	 Grand Portage Band of Lake Superior Chippewa	

# sovereignty

In making treaties, Dakota and Ojibwe operated as independent, sovereign nations, recognized by the Constitution. Their *sovereignty*—the ability to make their own rules, determine their own membership, maintain their own territory—existed prior to the U.S. and remains today.

Even in treaties that ceded land to the U.S., Dakota and Ojibwe often kept rights to minerals, timber, and land use. These rights were not given—they were *retained* by sovereign nations. These treaties are still in effect.

Today, treaty rights are exercised by 11 tribal governments within Minnesota, led by chairs equivalent to state governors. Their sovereignty arises from beyond the U.S. system. It arises from the sense of connection to the land and people that defines and sustains Dakota and Ojibwe nations.



# land

Land-focused treaties were about more than who owns what: the issue at stake was *how people relate to land*.

In U.S. systems, progress is dictated by ownership and economic gain. Land is real estate, measured in lots and acres.

Ojibwe and Dakota systems are rooted in the recognition of human beings as participants in—rather than owners of—the natural world, with progress dictated by sustainability and adaptability.



Treaties affirm the sovereignty of American Indian nations, enabling tribal governments to maintain a nation-to-nation relationship with the U.S. government.

# today

Treaties are living documents that recognize American Indian governments and guarantee the preservation of Native lands and lifeways for future generations. More than 150 years after treaties were signed, tribes in Minnesota celebrate treaties and their sovereignty.

In the 21st century, Native people in Minnesota are drawing on treaty rights

and tribal traditions to find balance in an ever-changing world.

By restoring prairie habitat, revitalizing their languages, and celebrating their heritage, the tribes are exercising their rights as sovereign nations as well as embracing the Ojibwe concept of *bimaadiziwin*—the “good life.”

