

European Contact with First Peoples and the Spread of Disease

The first known contact between the indigenous groups in the Kootenays and Europeans occurred in 1811, when David Thompson entered the West Kootenay by canoe, looking for a navigable route to the Pacific. But by the time he reached the area, the Sinixt, Yaqan Nuki and Ktunaxa population had already steeply declined as a result of smallpox, measles and influenza, spread through inter-tribal trade with Europeans some 40 years earlier. It is estimated that Sinixt population alone had decreased from as many as several thousand to several hundred (13).

Although the Sinixt and Yaqan Nuki Nations used this area seasonally, the group that had the most presence in this landscape are the Sinixt. In the 1820's, the Sinixt began to over winter near trade forts established along the Upper Columbia, mostly south of the border. They were also drawn to these regions because missionaries provided badly needed vaccinations. As Europeans established dominance and divided up the land for mining and agriculture, their laws made it more difficult for the Sinixt to maintain their seasonal rounds, which depended on crossing the Canada/US border, established in 1846. Many Sinixt began to overwinter in the Colville Valley in Washington, where a reservation was established in 1872.

In 1902 a reserve was established in the Kootenays, near Oatscott, but the location was not suited to the Sinixt seasonal land use, was in a remote location, and therefore did not attract a large population (18). When the last known Sinixt woman on the reserve roll died in 1956, the Federal Government declared the Sinixt extinct. This, despite the fact that many Sinixt had been living off reserve, and the Colville Reservation had 257 people in their roll at the time (21). Sinixt people continue to live in our region, and they are working to regain Government recognition and restoration of their aboriginal rights in Canada.

Sources:

Delehanty Pearkes, E. (2002) *The Geography of Memory: Recovering Stories of a Landscape's First People*. Winlaw, BC: Kutenai House Press.