

I. Introduction

Native American Reservations, tracts of land set aside for the ownership or use of particular Native American tribes.

The term comes from 19th-century agreements, in which the tribes ceded their lands to the U.S. government except for portions "reserved" for their own use.

II. History

By creating Native American reservations, the government hoped to avoid clashes over land boundaries between Native Americans and white settlers and to confine Native American tribes to tracts where they could be watched and (occasionally) provided for by federal effort.

The tribes were generally free to live as they wished on their lands, as long as they remained peaceful. As the American frontier pushed westward, however, Native American land became increasingly attractive to white settlers, while the Native Americans themselves were considered impediments to progress.

As a result, reservations were made smaller or were relocated to remote areas undesirable to whites. By the 1880s areas reserved for the Native Americans had shrunk to about 53.4 million hectares (about 132 million acres).

Native Americans had difficulty making a living from the land, and their older cultures had been shattered by contact with whites.

As a remedy, the government tried to force them to assimilate into the mainstream of American life. The plan called for breaking up reservations into allotments, then issuing the allotments to individual Native Americans. Ideally, they were to farm their plots; instead, many of them sold their allotments or leased them to whites. Thus, by 1934, Native Americans were left with only about 25 percent of the reservation land they had held in the 1880s.

Although most tribes own their reservation land, it is held in trust by the federal government. As trustee, the government must ensure that the land is properly managed and is not lost to its Native American owners.

III. Modern Reservations: Controversy and Problems

By moving reservations away from the major routes of white commerce in the 19th century, the government inadvertently provided some tribes with a 20th-century bonanza in energy resources. Some reservations in western states include rich deposits of coal, natural gas, uranium, and oil.

One controversy on these reservations is whether the tribes or the government should control access to these resources. In the past, the government, as trustee, controlled all agreements between tribes and energy corporations.

The tribes are now insisting on more authority in handling agreements.

Although many Native Americans regard their reservation lands as a key to the survival of Native

American culture, most reservations are still underdeveloped, and their inhabitants among the poorest of the nation's poor.

During the 1980s, the Reagan administration encouraged the reservations to adopt a policy of self-help and private enterprise, including promotion of legal gambling as a revenue earner.