

Laboratoire de recherche pour le soutien des communautés (LARESCO) de l'UQAT

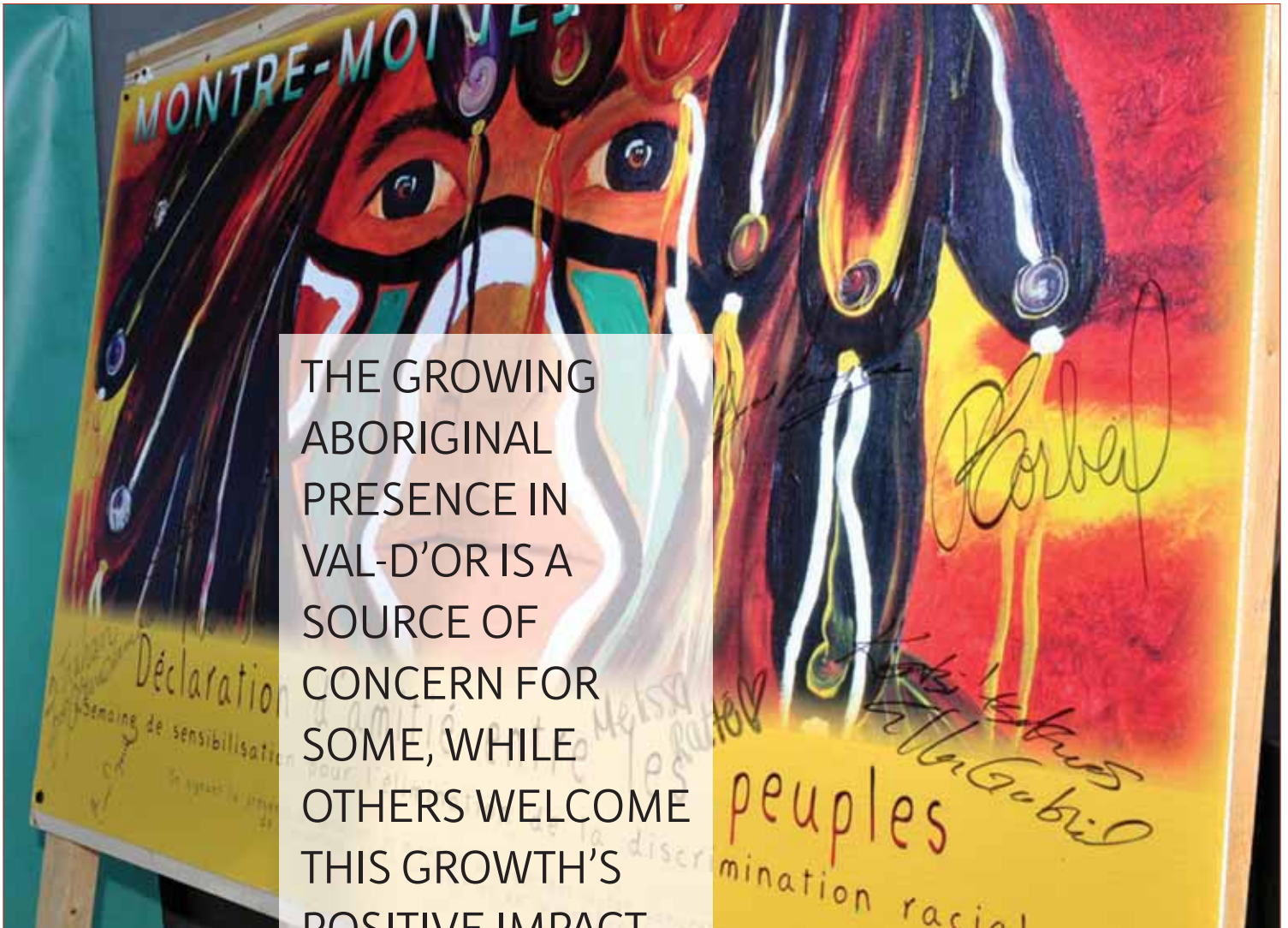
LARESCO

Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals in Val-d'Or, **GOOD NEIGHBORS?**

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THE GROWING ABORIGINAL PRESENCE IN VAL-D'OR IS A SOURCE OF CONCERN FOR SOME, WHILE OTHERS WELCOME THIS GROWTH'S POSITIVE IMPACT ON THE ECONOMY. MANY ABORIGINALS, FOR THEIR PART, CONTEND THAT THEY ARE TARGETS OF RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION.

WHERE DO THINGS REALLY STAND?

Le Laboratoire de recherche pour le soutien des communautés [Community support research laboratory] (LARESCO) at l'UQAT set out to better understand Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations in Val-d'Or. The Laboratory collected information from among the population of Val-d'Or and its surroundings, as well as from community and business associations, as well as public organizations, between 2006 and 2008.

GENERALLY SPEAKING, relations between groups are more likely to be harmonious when, on the one hand, those groups place a high importance on exchanges between them and, on the other, when those exchanges involve people who are sensitive towards, and curious about, the other's culture. Conversely, indifference towards the culture of a minority group and the desire to avoid contacts only pave the way for conflict. The situation observed in Val-d'Or may be situated somewhere in between these two extremes.



1. MANY VARIED RELATIONS

FOR MANY YEARS NOW, Aboriginals have lived in and transited through Val-d'Or. In 2006, Val-d'Or's population counted 30 600 people, of whom 805 declared their identity as Aboriginal, accounting for 2.6 % of the population. In the Vallée-de-l'Or RCM, overall, 2 825 people declared an Aboriginal identity, accounting for 6.8 % of the total population of 41 275 residents. Both the real number and the relative proportion of Val-d'Or's Aboriginal population have been rising steadily for years; this is a young population and one that is experiencing demographic growth.

Perceptions of the size of the city's Aboriginal population vary widely according to group. While Aboriginals estimate their numbers to be approximately 1 500 people, on average, non-Aboriginals, for their part, believe the number to be over 4 000. The discrepancy may be partly explained by non-Aboriginals' difficulty to distinguish between Aboriginals residing in Val-d'Or and those who are part of the transient population.

Indeed, because it is a center of activities and services, aside from the city's permanent residents Val-d'Or attracts people from surrounding Algonquin communities (Lac Simon, Kitcisakik) and from Aboriginal communities based in Cree territory around James Bay (Eeyou Istchee). People from these communities regularly visit Val-d'Or, staying temporarily or over extended periods. The number of people from Cree and Algonquin communities who annually make use of Val-d'Or's health services is estimated in the thousands.

Interviewed Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals strongly identify with their respective ethnocultural group (for example: Quebecois, Algonquin, Cree). However, this sense of belonging appears to be more pronounced among Aboriginals.

Among non-Aboriginals, 60% stated that they count Aboriginals among their friends or close acquaintances; 16% of people who reported having Aboriginal friends stated that they see them every day, or nearly every day. The fact of having Aboriginal friends, or not, and the frequency of contacts with them were not related to years of residence in Val-d'Or.

Among Aboriginals, 95 % stated that there are non-Aboriginals among their friends or close acquaintances, and 25 % reported seeing them every day or almost every day. The fact of having non-Aboriginal friends, or not, was not related to either permanent residence or transience in Val-d'Or. However, Aboriginals residing in Val-d'Or reported somewhat more frequent contacts with their non-Aboriginal friends than did Aboriginals transiting through the city.

Relations between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals also develop within organizations that serve the population. Val-d'Or has 158 community and business associations, of which ten or so are Aboriginal associations, as well as a wide range of public institutions, particularly in the fields of education (primary, secondary, collegiate, and university), health, social services, policing, and municipal services. These organizations provide services for the city's residents and for neighboring and remote communities.

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Highlight good relations between First Nations Pavilion. It is also im

2. AMBIVALENT RELATIONS

VAL-D'OR IS THE SITE of regular encounters between various Aboriginal nations and the non-Aboriginal majority. Notwithstanding the presence of certain residential concentrations, permanent Aboriginal residents inhabit all of the city's neighborhoods.

The great majority of Aboriginals (87%) and non-Aboriginals (82%) interviewed reported feeling at ease and open when in the presence of individuals belonging to the other group. Moreover, 86 % of Aboriginals asserted having positive attitudes towards non-Aboriginals. Their attitudes are marked by respect and openness. However, 60% of Aboriginals consider that various levels of government frequently ignore their needs and 50 % believe that non-Aboriginals harbor hostile attitudes towards them.

The attitudes of non-Aboriginals towards Aboriginals are somewhat more ambivalent. In point of fact, fully 87% of non-Aboriginals assert that they respect Aboriginal customs and traditions and 70% are interested in learning more about Aboriginal history and culture. On the other hand, 68% of non-Aboriginals state that Aboriginals exaggerate when it comes to the question of their rights and that they should be doing more to integrate into modern society, while 80 % assert that Aboriginals receive too many financial benefits from various levels of government.

Slightly more than half of Aboriginals (52%) feel that relations with non-Aboriginals are negative: they feel that these relations are colored mainly by unfamiliarity and tension, but Aboriginals also detect in them a measure of openness. For 75% of non-Aboriginals, relations between the two groups are negative, marked mainly by unfamiliarity, tension, conflict, rejection, and indifference.

There are proportionally fewer non-Aboriginals (33%) than Aboriginals (61%) who believe that Aboriginals are targets of discrimination in Val-d'Or. For non-Aboriginals, discrimination against Aboriginals is present mainly in the areas of housing and employment. For Aboriginals, housing is the major area of discrimination, but they also point to discrimination in social services, public security (police), employment, the media, and justice. However, mutual expectations tend to be positive. Indeed, interviewed non-Aboriginals (55%) and Aboriginals (64%) alike consider that members of the other group place a high importance on maintaining good intergroup relations.

Among the 71 non-Aboriginal community and business associations contacted by phone, only 14 reported having no Aboriginal members or users. Among ten contacted Aboriginal community and business associations, only one reported an exclusively Aboriginal membership and clientele. In short, Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals frequently interact and collaborate within local association, thus reflecting the importance each group places on maintaining relations with the other.





Val-d'Or and the Native Friendship Center, as well as the City's involvement in UQAT's important to note the First Nations Pavilion construction project at UQAT



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According to 84% (27 out of 32) of contacted associations, it is important to maintain contacts with other cultural groups (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) and it is important that Aboriginals preserve their culture. Furthermore, 13% of associations (4 out of 32) consider that individuals' culture should not be taken into account in the delivery of services. Among the representatives of the contacted associations, only one believes that Aboriginals should wholly adopt the ways of the non-Aboriginal majority.

Analyses carried out by public institutions indicate that intergroup exchanges in the fields of education and health tend to be harmonious. By contrast, a different portrait emerges when one examines the political relations between the City of Val-d'Or and Algonquin representative bodies, that is, the Council of the Anishnabe Nation of Lac Simon, the Anicinapek of Kitcisakik Band Council, and the Algonquin Nation Tribal Council. City of Val-d'Or documents are testimony to a policy of openness towards Aboriginal culture and to the recognition of the importance of sustained economic relations. However, while many Cree Nation projects have received financial support, only one Algonquin Nation project received funding between 2001 and 2006.

Asked to describe and to qualify their relations with the City, Lac Simon and Kitcisakik leaders indicated that dialogue was often difficult. In their view, the source of conflict was the City's reticence to recognize that it is situated on Algonquin territory and, consequently, its failure to discuss plans for the development and sharing of the territory's resources. Moreover, the Tribal Council does not recognize City of Val-d'Or

representatives as legitimate discussion partners, declining their invitations, and prefers instead to negotiate with the provincial and federal governments. An assessment of the interactions between the City and the political representatives of the Cree Nation offers in a more positive result, as both parties seem to benefit from their relations. It is important also to mention Val-d'Or's good relations with the Native Friendship Center, as well as the City's involvement in UQAT's First Nations Pavilion construction project. In issues of policing and social services, episodic tensions make themselves felt, particularly in instances where the *Sûreté du Québec* or the *Direction de la protection de la jeunesse* [Youth Protection Department] intervene in the communities of Lac Simon and Kitcisakik. Factors contributing to these tensions are discussed in the following section.



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3. OPENNESS AND PROXIMITY

TWO FACTORS CONTRIBUTE to quality relations between the groups: an openness towards the others' concerns about culture preservation and the facilitation of contacts between the groups. We asked participants whether they agreed with statements such as: **"I believe it is important that Aboriginals maintain their culture"** and **"I believe it is important that Aboriginals maintain contact with non-Aboriginal"**. We also asked the participants questions that aimed to gauge their perception of the other group's position on these statements.

The following figures are based on the responses of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants. An important finding emerges from these responses: both groups have misconceptions about each other's positions. For example, 86% of non-Aboriginals believe that it is important for Aboriginals to maintain their culture, but only 62% of Aboriginals believe that non-Aboriginals think it important for Aboriginals to maintain their culture. As well, while 77% of Aboriginals believe that it is important to maintain contacts with non-Aboriginals, only 29% of non-Aboriginals believe that Aboriginals think it important to maintain contacts.

Factors linked to negative attitudes towards the other group differ to an important degree for Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals. Specifically, Aboriginals who tend to harbor negative attitudes towards non-Aboriginals are likely to:

1. **feel ill at ease in the presence of non-Aboriginals;**
2. **identify strongly with their own group (for example: Algonquin, Cree, First Nations);**
3. **perceive relations between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals in Val-d'Or to be negative;**
4. **have few non-Aboriginal friends or close acquaintances;**
5. **perceive a high level of discrimination against Aboriginals in Val-d'Or.**

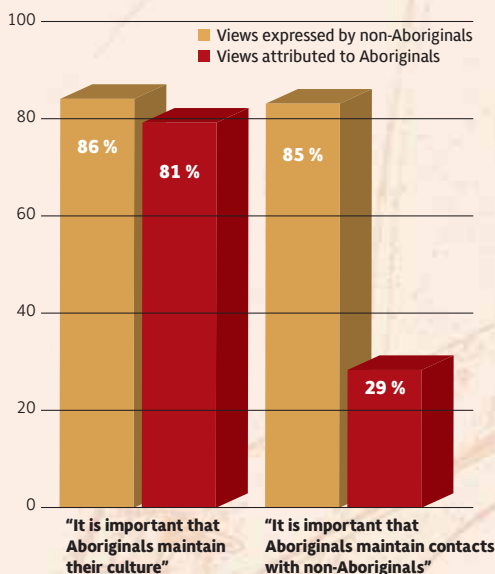
Non-Aboriginals who tend to harbor negative attitudes towards Aboriginals are likely to:

1. **perceive that Aboriginals receive more financial benefits than they deserve;**
2. **hold negative perceptions of various First Nations;**
3. **think that Aboriginals do not place any importance on maintaining good relations with non-Aboriginals;**
4. **not participate in activities organized by the Val-d'Or Native Friendship Center;**
5. **view Aboriginal values, beliefs, traditions, and way of life as incompatible with their own;**
6. **assert that it is not important for Aboriginals to maintain their culture;**
7. **contend that there are too many Aboriginals in Val-d'Or;**
8. **perceive that relations between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals in Val-d'Or are negative.**

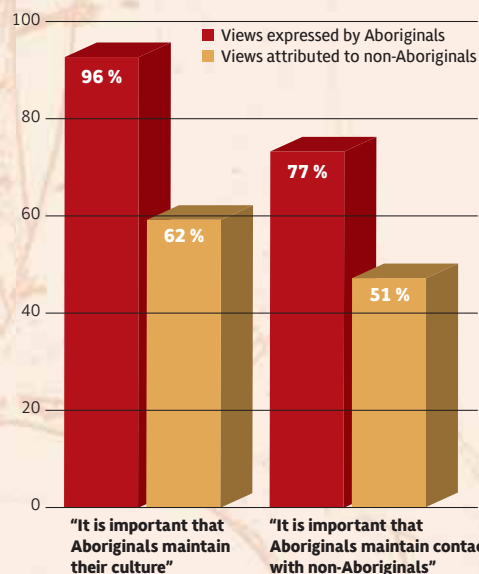
Non-Aboriginals who hold negative attitudes towards Aboriginals are more likely to be male, older, and less educated.

Community and business associations who are favorable towards Aboriginals preserving their culture and towards contacts between the two groups all share a willingness to collaborate, to work with, or to offer services to members of the other cultural group. Those that exhibit the highest degree of this willingness demonstrate an openness towards the other group's culture and knowledge of the group's history. These associations have adapted their services, have experienced successful collaborative projects, and place a high importance on the respect of the other's culture. Associations whose willingness is less pronounced are those that do not have Aboriginal members, even though they may clearly express their wish to work with Aboriginals. Moreover, these associations fear potential difficulties, although they do not have current relations with members of the other group.

RESPONSES OF NON-ABORIGINAL PARTICIPANTS



RESPONSES OF ABORIGINAL PARTICIPANTS



Our study also points to the positive impact of the mutual desire to maintain economic and cultural relations between the City of Val-d'Or and Cree institutions. Conversely, we observed a mutually averse attitude towards establishing a dialogue on the part of many Algonquin leaders and the City's municipal authorities. Analyses show that this problematic relationship does not reflect the state of relations among private citizens.

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The only association among those contacted that deems it unimportant for Aboriginals to conserve their culture nevertheless serves an Aboriginal clientele. The association has no documentation on services delivered to Aboriginals and does not offer to them any specific or adapted services. This association asserts its openness towards Aboriginals, although it admits its unfamiliarity with their culture, as well as the resulting difficulties to efficiently deliver services.

Those associations that feel that individuals' culture should not be taken into account, nevertheless do serve Aboriginals among their clientele. These associations focus their services on the individual and consider that Aboriginal language and culture have disappeared. Many community and business associations signaled their wish to access documents and individuals who could provide them with information that would help them to better understand Aboriginal culture. These associations are in search of tools that can facilitate the mutual integration of the two cultural groups. Nearly all associations express a willingness to work towards the improvement of relations, notwithstanding difficulties encountered in the past.

As concerns public institutions, Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations vary according to context. In education and health care, there is a mutual willingness to further interactions and, through dialogue, officials seek ways to develop programs and services adapted to the needs of their clienteles in accordance with available resources. In these institutions relations are largely harmonious.

We observed that relations between the Sûreté du Québec and Aboriginal institutions are more problematic. The Sûreté only occasionally intervenes within Algonquin communities, and intercultural relations are not among its priorities. Despite the initiatives of certain officers and officials who wish to gain a better understanding of Aboriginal life conditions, the task of police officers remains to ensure that everyone respects the law, no matter their ethnocultural background. This task, although unavoidable, does not result in harmonious relations.



PHOTO: PAUL BRINDAMOUR

As does the police, the Youth Protection Department conducts interventions within Aboriginal communities in accordance with its legal mandate. The Abitibi-Témiscamingue Youth Center's orientation for 2006-2009 activities, called for increased collaborative relations with Aboriginal institutions. Our analyses, carried out in 2007, revealed tense relations between the Aboriginals of the Vallée-de-l'Or region and the Youth Center, whom the Councils of Lac Simon and Kitcisakik asked for increased flexibility in the application of laws and rules. Since then, and in collaboration with Algonquin communities, the Youth Center has implemented programs and services that take Aboriginal culture into account: the recent inauguration of a group home in Louvicourt is a concrete example of these initiatives.

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4. COURSES OF ACTION

OUR PROJECT PARTNERS ARE OF THE OPINION that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal authorities must share the responsibility of promoting harmonious relations. They propose several courses of action.



- > Work together to elaborate the foundations of a viable social vision of coexistence.
- > Hire Aboriginal liaison personnel to staff various public institutions.
- > Encourage Aboriginals to get involved in the region's various social committees and organizations.
- > Work towards the inception of an association of First Nations' ambassadors.
- > Support intercultural activities organized by Aboriginal communities.
- > Support and widely publicize Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal cooperative achievements in all areas of activity.



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GLOSSARY

Aboriginal or person declaring an Aboriginal identity: In the Canadian census, a person who declares themselves as belonging an Aboriginal group, that is, Indian, Inuit, or Métis.

Band / Band Council: A band is an organizational structure representing a particular group of Indians for whom Crown Lands have been reserved under the provisions of the Indian Act. Each Band is governed by a Band Council that usually consists of a Chief and Councillors who are elected by the band's resident and non-resident members. The Band Council oversees all community affairs and services.

Tribal Council: Regional-level political body made up of several bands, representing the interests of those bands. For example, the Tribal Council of the Algonquin Anishinabeg Nation is concerned with the protection and advancement of Aboriginal rights for its constituent communities, among which are Lac Simon and Kitcisakik.

METHODOLOGY

Population figures were drawn from the 2006 Canadian Census. These figures were complemented by observations carried out in places of residence during 2006-2008. In order to assess the opinions of the general population, we interviewed 303 non-Aboriginal persons residing in Val-d'Or and 111 Aboriginal persons (44 residents and 67 transiting through Val-d'Or) during the summer of 2008. This sample was selected using the snowball method and is representative of the overall population, with the exception of having a slightly higher degree of education. In order to assess the views of community and business associations, we first located 158 associations situated in Val-d'Or; we then conducted telephone interviews with 81 of these associations in fall 2007. In winter 2008, we conducted in-depth interviews with 32 community and business associations.

To assess the views of public institutions in Val-d'Or on the quality of relations between the non-Aboriginal majority and Aboriginal minority groups of the region, we first analyzed the documentation produced by these institutions, and subsequently interviewed service administrators in the fields of education, health care, social services, police, and municipal services in Val-d'Or, as well as in Lac Simon and Kitcisakik. This information was collected during 2006-2007.

PROJECT PARTNERS



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