

Ki'suk kyukyit (greetings). The Lower Kootenay Band is a member Band of the Ktunaxa Nation. Four Bands are located in South Eastern British Columbia and two in the United States (One Band is in North Idaho and the other in Montana). Before the 49th parallel was established the Ktunaxa Nation occupied our traditional territory hunting, gathering medicines and roots, fishing, and doing what was necessary for survival. The Bands traveled freely throughout the beautiful territory.



Message from the Chief

BY JASON LOUIE

Chief - Lower Kootenay Band

The Ktunaxa Nation

When the 49th parallel was established this changed the Ktunaxa Nations way of life forever. In both the United States and Canada, indigenous people were not considered citizens of either country. Indigenous people were confined to live within the boundaries of the Reserves or Reservations. The Lower Kootenay Band and the Kootenai Tribe of Idaho are very closely related. The International Boundary split entire families. Freedom and dignity were taken away.

This year marks 9 years that I traveled to the Indian Affairs Office in Vancouver to advocate for what is known as the Machine Readable Zone Status Cards (MRZ). When the meeting began with the Indian Affairs Officials, I requested that the Lower Kootenay Band be granted the Machine Readable Zone Status Cards. The MRZ are Certificates of Indian Status that have a bar code on them where Customs officials can scan the cards for border crossing.

The outcome of that meeting was a denial of my request. Indian Affairs stated that the MRZ cards are only issued for Bands in Eastern Canada. It was disappointing and frustrating, to say the least. I began to build bridges and alliances with both US Customs and Canada Border Services Agency to assist with this cause. Both border agencies have indigenous travelers who use their status cards for crossing the borders but it is time-consuming for the officers as they have to manually enter the information from each card. Both the US Customs and CBSA have seen the value in trying to make this a reality.

Some may say why not just get a passport? It really is not that simple. Some families cannot afford a passport. Some LKB members were born in the United States and do not qualify for a passport but are eligible for a Certificate of Indian Status. And some LKB members simply have personal reasons for not obtaining a passport.

In January of this year, Indian Affairs Officials contacted me stating that the Lower Kootenay Band will be one of three First Nations in Canada to be a part of a pilot project for the Machine Readable Zone Status Cards. In February, Indian Affairs will be on site at the Lower Kootenay Band issuing the MRZ cards. This is great news, however, there is much work to prepare. Approximately half of Lower Kootenay Bands population lives off Reserve living in all parts of Canada and the United

States. We formed a small task force team who have been working hard day and night attempting to make contact with members and providing the necessary paperwork for them to obtain their MRZ cards.

The MRZ cards are not the answer to all of the very complex issues that the Lower Kootenay Band faces with respect to border crossing issues. This is, however, a step in the right direction. I would like to thank both the US Customs and the Canada Border Services Agency for all of their hard work and assistance with this initiative that has spanned almost a decade. Also, thank you to our task force team who worked tirelessly to contact the LKB members off reserve. TAXAS