

## **CANADA'S METIS POPULATION GROWING FAST**

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Métis Nation B.C. vice-president and Saltair resident Lorne LaFleur fears the loss of Metis culture. If you don't think you know any Métis people, chances are you're wrong.

Statistics released earlier this month from the 2006 census show the Métis are the fastest growing sector of an aboriginal population that has now topped one million nationwide.

In the Cowichan Valley, the place B.C.'s largest First Nation calls home, the Métis now represent 20 per cent of the aboriginal population at 1,445.

Since 1996 the number of people calling themselves Métis in Canada has doubled to nearly 400,000.

"There have always been a high number of Métis people around but we typically haven't identified ourselves as Métis," Métis Nation B.C. vice-president and Saltair resident Lorne LaFleur said.

"During the last five years there has been a big push to raise awareness of our heritage and who we are and I think we're starting to see more people willing to identify where as before there was fear of persecution."

With 37 chartered Métis communities throughout the province — six on Vancouver Island — LaFleur believes there is a feeling among Métis that if there isn't a change, the language and culture could be lost forever.

"Many people don't recognize that we are distinct people, with a distinct language and culture," he said.

"If people don't identify themselves as Métis and put that first foot forward, we could see our heritage disappear."

Along with First Nations, high birthrates among the Métis are also contributing to the population surge — First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples are reproducing across the country at rates close to six times the non-aboriginal population.

The aboriginal population, now representing four per cent of the country's population, has a median age of 27 compared to 40 for the rest of Canada.

"Ladysmith's growth made headlines across the country when the numbers came out showing they were growing at a rate of 10.7 per cent," Hul'qumi'num Treaty Group representative Brian Thom said.

"The Cowichan have increased by 45.9 per cent. Chemainus band is at 22.9 per cent. The Halalt are 32.2 per cent. "The pace of the population growth is huge."

Thom says the young and growing population is putting pressure on treaty negotiators to find a

way to engage the youth, who the agreements will ultimately affect.

“We’ve been told by our members we need to find ways to reach out to the young population and get them interested in the treaty process,” he said.

“We’ll be looking at using tools like the Internet and Facebook.”

Thom said the increased growth is also putting pressure on housing and services to members on reserves, pushing a greater number into urban centres.

“Houses just aren’t being built as quickly as the population is increasing,” Thom said. “What’s interesting is the number of homes with more than one person per room. In Cowichan it’s eight times the average of the province.”

Thom believes the real indicators of how aboriginal people are faring compared to the rest of the population will come out with the unemployment and wage statistics later this year.

“I hope there’s a good story to say the disparity has leveled out but I’m not sure that will be the case,” he said.

More details on the 2006 Census data on Aboriginal Peoples can be accessed at [www.statcan.ca](http://www.statcan.ca).

**Total number of aboriginals in Cowichan Valley Regional District — 7,420**

First Nations — 5,975

Métis — 1,445

**Percentage of aboriginal population growth on reserve from 2001 to 2006:**

Penelakut — 17.6

Chemainus — 22.9

Halalt — 32.2

Cowichan — 45.9

Lake Cowichan — 50

Total Hul’qumi’num Treaty Group — 35

**Percentage of municipality growth from 2001 to 2006:**

North Cowichan — 5.4

Duncan — 6.1

Ladysmith — 10.7

**Dwellings with more than one person per room as percentage of total occupied dwellings:**

Cowichan Tribes — 16

Chemainus First Nation — 10.5

B.C. — 2.8

**Median age in years:**

Cowichan Tribes — 23.5

Chemainus First Nation — 25.7

B.C. — 40