



State Population Profile

SOUTH DAKOTA: A HISTORY CARVED IN STONE

An NPG Commentary
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With three cows for every person, South Dakota is a remote and rural state. There are more people who live in the greater metropolitan area of Tucson, Arizona than live in the entire Mount Rushmore State. Its rural character is exemplified by the fact that it is easy to purchase firearms and 14 year-olds can get their driver's permit. With just over 12 people per square mile, your chances of getting caught in a traffic jam are pretty low. However, the chances of breathing clean air and seeing the stars shine at night are very high.

Although the state remains largely rural and sparsely populated, population growth has increasingly concentrated around urban areas such as Sioux Falls and Rapid City, while many rural and agricultural areas have experienced slower growth or population decline. These population shifts from farms and rural communities toward growing urban centers reflect the fact that even rural states can experience localized resource pressures that can accompany concentrated population growth.

Federal policies encouraging westward settlement and homesteading brought thousands of settlers into the territory and transformed millions of acres into farms and ranches, helping establish permanent communities and contributing to population growth and eventual statehood. These policies ignored native land rights and treaties as part of western expansion.

A major reason for population growth in the territory was that under the Homestead Act of 1862, "... any head of household or adult citizen, or intended citizen, who had never borne arms against the U.S. government could claim 160 acres of surveyed government land by living on it for five years and paying a filing fee." Anyone filing such a claim had to live on the land, build a dwelling, and make other such improvements. Once the settler lived on the land for six months and paid the government \$1.25 an acre, they could acquire a title to the land. Union veterans of the Civil War could use their time served toward fulfilling the residency requirement.

The Dakota Territory at the time was plagued by everything from low crop prices and grasshopper infestations to droughts and blizzards. Still enough were motivated to risk all of that for the promise of a new life and their own land.¹

The entire state of South Dakota has a population of just under one million people. In 2025, the number was 935,094 residents. As such, it is the 5th least populated state in the Union, amounting to a very low population density. It lacks an extensive job market and mainly features an agricultural economy spread across a massive landscape. Combined with its harsh winter climate and lack of large urban centers, it isn't attracting the numbers it once did back in the Black Hills gold rush days. It is a land of extreme weather

where temperatures have registered between -58 and +120 degrees Fahrenheit, averaging between 10 and 90 degrees.

Its main cities are Sioux Falls, Rapid City, and its capital, Pierre, where unemployment is low but jobs in arts, entertainment, and technology are scarce. It is a place of horizons, not high-rises. Its tallest building is the CenturyLink Building which stands at 11 stories.²

TOURIST ATTRACTIONS GALORE

The South Dakota landscape becomes more interesting as one travels westward. The state is 380 miles wide and offers plains in the east with the Badlands and the Black Hills in the west. South Dakota offers a variety of geological formations. The Harney Peak Granite, which formed 1.7 billion years ago in the Black Hills, provided the perfect canvas for Gutzon Borglum to begin sculpting the four presidents memorialized on Mount Rushmore. It also provided the permanent medium for the Crazy Horse Memorial, a tribute to the Oglala Lakota leader.

South Dakota has some unique features besides the aforementioned Mount Rushmore and Crazy Horse Memorials. It is also home to the Corn Palace in Mitchell, where 325,000 ears of naturally colored corn and native grasses form into massive mosaic murals. Between 500,000 and 600,000 motorcycle enthusiasts descend on Sturgis, South Dakota, in August for the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally, an event lasting seven to 10 days. The rally has grown considerably since 1938, when it began as a one-day event.

It may be surprising to learn that this quiet state has more shoreline than Florida thanks mainly to Lake Oahe, the 231-mile-long reservoir along the Missouri River. Over 1,300 free roaming bison greet visitors to Custer State Park, which is about a 30-minute drive from Rapid City.

The Badlands are a mecca for fossil hunters and paleontologists who have discovered at least 175 different species dating back to the Oligocene era, including ancient rhinoceroses dating back 23 million years. In 1990, a nearly complete specimen of *Tyrannosaurus (T) rex* was found in Badlands National Park. The park is also renowned for its amazing deposits of mammal fossil beds. A cat-like creature

called *Nimravid* is one such carnivore fossil found there. The park is home to the *Subhyracodon*, a true ancestor of the rhino family.³

This sparsely populated state has amazing caves to visit, with Wind Cave and Jewel Cave among the most popular attractions. Wind Cave has 132 mapped passages decorated with colorful popcorn-like structures formed between 60 and 100 million years ago. It is a sacred place to many tribes – including the Lakota people – who believe that this is where Mother Earth breathed life into the world. Jewel Cave boasts many unique formations including one that resembles a long, curled slice of bacon. Together they attract over 700,000 tourists per year.

SOUTH DAKOTA'S NATIVE HISTORY

Today, nine federally recognized tribal governments maintain reservations and communities across South Dakota, including the Oglala Sioux and Cheyenne River Sioux. Indian reservations make up 12% of its land which amounts to about 5 million acres. They are infamously the most poverty-stricken reservations in the country. The most populated reservations are Pine Ridge and Rosebud. An estimated 41.2% of the population on these two reservations lives below the poverty level. This is mainly due to a lack of employment opportunities and historic issues surrounding a brutal history of war, displacement, and racism.⁴

Earlier in its history, approximately 10,000 years ago, the land was populated by those who hunted bison, followed by the Mandan and Arikara who established great trading networks. In the 1700s, the Sioux tribes were pushed westward from the Great Lakes region and into the territory that would become South Dakota. There were long intermittent wars between the Sioux and the U.S. government from 1854 to 1890, ending with the well-known massacre at Wounded Knee. The search for gold was the impetus behind violating the treaties which were to be protected from non-Native settlement. A deluge of prospectors flooded the region after gold was discovered in 1874.

During the 1870s, the search for gold in the Black Hills had attracted thousands of settlers to the western

part of Dakota Territory. During this period, the Sioux peoples were killed and disenfranchised from their lands several times over.

Despite the Second Treaty of Fort Laramie (1868), which guaranteed the Sioux people exclusive possession of the land west of the Missouri River, miners swarmed to the area. In the Sioux “agreement” of 1877, Congress forced the Sioux groups to give up their claim to the Black Hills and its surrounding area. Notably, the Sioux tribes initiated a lawsuit in 1887, which was not finally decided until 1980, when the U.S. Supreme Court decreed that the Black Hills belonged to the Sioux and that the taking of the land without compensation was illegal. The court authorized the federal government to pay the Sioux more than \$100 million for the land. The tribes refused to accept the settlement, however, unless Congress returned all federal land in the Black Hills, amounting to 1.3 million acres [526,000 hectares], which the Sioux regard as part of their heritage and as their basic treaty right. At the beginning of the 21st century, the Sioux had still not accepted a monetary settlement from the U.S. government.

Each poverty-stricken sovereign reservation is a desolate windswept space where regal peoples were sent and then largely forgotten. They beg us to right the wrongs of history and invest in a better future for them and their descendants. Modern times have not erased the scars of the past. Pine Ridge is home to the poorest community in America with 89% unemployment. Infant mortality is an unbelievable 300 times the national average, and housing costs are high – as are the fuel costs to heat and cool them.

Fortunately, NGO groups like In Our Hands are making a difference. Using grants and donations, sustainable housing projects – made of a new type of cellular concrete technology – are going up across Indian Country in South Dakota. These new houses are clean, warm, and energy efficient.⁵

ICONIC WILDLIFE ABOUNDS

Not too many states can promise that you will see elk, bighorn sheep, and bison. Added to these iconic mammals are prairie dogs, coyotes, and beavers. South Dakota is definitely a state for those who enjoy wide open spaces and the possibility of wildlife encounters.

There are two bird flyways which crisscross the middle of the state, bringing many bird species during spring and fall migrations. Because of this, South Dakota can boast of having nearly 400 bird species which call its diverse terrain home. Its state bird, the non-native ring-necked pheasant, is also the reason many hunters travel to the state. This popular game species generates over \$280 million in hunter-based tourist dollars each year.

South Dakota is bisected by the Missouri River, locally referred to as the “Mighty Mo.” The Great Lakes Birding Trail is located around the central Great Lakes, which are reservoirs created by dams on the river, and it is also home to 322 bird species, 164 of which breed there. Just over 51 million dollars are generated by birdwatchers to the state, especially during migration times.⁶

CONCLUSION

South Dakota is a bookmark in time. Life slows down on the way to the Black Hills, not only by the state’s infamous potholes, but by the overall lack of modernity. The state lacks some of the usual infrastructure one can expect in other states.

What it does have to offer are unequaled tourist sites which are worth the trip, like the monument indicating the geographic center of the nation. It is a place one can go, hopefully in good weather, to be reminded of what wide open spaces look and feel like. It is a place where one can enjoy the sunrise and the sunset from the same location. It is a place that knows no multi-lane traffic jams and soul-choking skyscrapers. It is a place where the night skies offer vistas of the Milky Way and the occasional shooting star. It is a state with a lesson to teach because it harbors much of America’s heritage which so many states have lost to the albatross of growth and so-called progress.

As population growth becomes increasingly concentrated around South Dakota’s urban centers, protecting the open spaces and natural resources that define the state will become increasingly important. Keeping population growth at sustainable levels can help ensure that South Dakota retains its resources and distinctive rural character.

NOTES:

1. https://www.sdhsf.org/news_events/history_articles.html/title/may-2014-one-homesteader-s-impact-on-dakota-territory
2. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CenturyLink_Tower
3. <https://www.nps.gov/articles/brontothere.htm>
4. <https://www.keloland.com/keloland-com-original/poverty-poor-health-for-sds-native-americans/>
5. <https://www.oneearth.org/projects/providing-shelter-and-warmth-to-the-great-plains-tribes-through-a-novel-sustainable-housing-technology/>
6. <https://www.sdmissouririver.com/explore-adventure/wildlife/>



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