Modernization and the Impact of Assimilation

The Meiji period (1868–1912) brought rapid modernization and sweeping land reforms to Japan, but these changes posed challenges to Ainu living in Hokkaido. Privatization of land and resources and prohibitions on hunting and fishing made it difficult to continue their traditional way of life. In 1899, the government enacted the Hokkaido Former Aborigine Protection Law. It was a program to assimilate Ainu into Japanese culture under the guise of protecting their rights.

The law stipulated that Ainu households be given around 5 hectares (12 acres) of land, but many of these plots were unsuitable for agriculture. Furthermore, if they failed to cultivate their land within a certain time, they risked having it taken away from them.

Education was another means through which the government enforced assimilation. Schools for Ainu children were established to teach Japanese

language and customs, and the use of Ainu language diminished.