In the Wake of Columbus: The Decline of the Native Peoples

Students learn of the catastrophic population decline among Native Americans while practicing measurement and graphing skills.

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Grade Level: 5
Duration: 1 class period

Overview
This lesson explores the population consequences of the European exploration of the Americas on native peoples. The geographic theme of place is not limited to what a place is like today. It includes, too, what it was like in the past. The historical geography of a place helps us understand and explain what a place is like today.
In the Wake of Columbus

Purpose
This lesson graphically shows the dramatic population decline of native peoples following the arrival of Europeans in the Americas and examines possible causes for this decline.

Materials
- In the Wake of Columbus timeline
- In the Wake of Columbus background information (for teachers)
- Graph of the native population of the central Andes
- Graph of the native population of central Mexico
- Graph of the native population of Hispaniola
- 3 one-gallon milk jugs, filled with water
- Measuring cup, graduated in cups and ounces
- Container for 3 gallons of discarded water

Objectives
The student will be able to:

1. Recognize the causes of native population decline.
2. Determine the magnitude of native population decline.

Procedures
Please read “Background Information for Teachers” prior to beginning the lesson.

Instructional Notes:
- For each of the three culture areas, begin with a full milk jug (128 ounces) to represent that area's pre-contact population.
- Pour out the indicated amount of water leaving the remaining water to represent the remaining population of indigenous people in a given year.

- Students will fill in the appropriate blank on their handout.
- Repeat for each decline and then proceed on to the next culture area.
- Students should use this information to construct graphs.
- Data are given for the following three areas: the central Andes, central Mexico, and Hispaniola (the location of the present-day countries of Haiti and the Dominican Republic).

CENTRAL ANDES
Students should record the population data on the lines of the worksheet.
1. Begin with a full milk jug of 128 ounces. This represents an estimated 12 million people in 1520.

2. Pour out 48 ounces. This leaves an estimated 7.5 million people in 1540.

3. Pour out 37.5 ounces. This leaves an estimated 4 million people in 1560.

4. Pour out 21 ounces. This leaves the estimated 2 million people in 1570.

5. Pour out 15 ounces. The remaining water represents the 1620 population of 600,000 native peoples.

CENTRAL MEXICO
Students should record the population data on the lines of the worksheet.
1. Start with a full milk jug to represent the estimated 25.2 million people in 1518.

2. Pour out 43 ounces, leaving the estimated 16.8 million people of 1532.

3. Pour out 53 ounces. This leaves an estimated 6.3 million people in 1548.
4. Pour out 18 ounces. The remaining water represents the 2.7 million native people left in 1568.

5. Pour out 4 ounces, the remaining water representing the 1.9 million people in 1580.

6. Pour out 3 ounces. This leaves an estimated 1.4 million native people in 1595.

7. Pour out 1 ounce, leaving an estimated population of 1.1 million in 1608.

**HISPANIOLA**

*Students should record the population data on the lines of the worksheet.*

1. Begin with a full milk jug, representing an estimated population of 1 million in 1492.

2. Pour out 120.5 ounces. This leaves the estimated population of 60,000 in 1508.

3. Pour out 5.5 ounces. The remaining water represents the estimated population of 14,000 in 1514.

4. Pour out all of the remaining water, representing the fact that no natives remained on Hispaniola in 1550.

**Assessment**

Math Assessment: Students should determine the appropriate type of graph (line or bar) for this assignment. Points can be assigned in for the following manner: accuracy (20 points) and correct choice of graph to create (10 points). Mastery is considered 24 points or higher.

Geography Assessment: Students’ timelines can be graded for accuracy. One point can be given for each date given (16 points). Mastery is considered 13 points or higher. The final assessment is to assign a reaction paper to gauge student’s comprehension of the post-contact population decline. The teacher will determine points for this assignment. A score of 80% or higher will be considered mastery.

**Extensions**

Students could calculate the percentage drop in population that occurred (usually around 90%-95%). Students could convert the measurements given in this activity to metric equivalents. Students could discuss what modern day diseases might cause a decline in a culture’s population (i.e., AIDS in some African countries).

**Sources**


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Numerous works of Sherburne F. Cook and Woodrow Borah.