

ACTIVITY 20.2

The Columbian Exchange: Positive and Negative Impacts

Before 1492 C.E., the New World was cut off from the rest of the world. The voyages of Christopher Columbus and other explorers introduced new animals, plants, and institutions to the New World. The Old World received other plants and animals from the New World. Many of these exchanges had positive impacts, but the impact of some exchanges was negative.

POSITIVE IMPACTS

From New World to Old World: **corn/maize**

Corn, or maize, is one of the most important foods the Old World received from the New World. Alfred Crosby wrote, “If maize were the only gift the American Indian ever presented to the world, he would deserve undying gratitude, for it has become one of the most important of all foods for men and their livestock.”¹ Corn can be grown on land that can’t easily grow rice or wheat. It has become an important food in Europe, Egypt, India, China, and other countries.



From Old World to New World: **cows, oxen, horses, donkeys, pigs, sheep**

Cattle were brought to Mexico in 1521. They became an important source of food and can pull and lift heavy loads. Horses allowed hunters to travel great distances and increased the area over which natives could search for food. Donkeys were important pack animals. Pigs and sheep were used for food and clothing.



From Old World to New World: **sugar cane**

The Spanish brought sugar to Mexico and Peru in the 16th century. It was soon grown in the Caribbean islands and other South American countries.



From Old World to New World: **bananas**

Bananas were first grown in Southeast Asia and brought to the Caribbean islands (Cuba, Jamaica, Haiti, and other islands) in 1516. The climate of the islands allowed banana trees to grow rapidly.



From New World to Old World: **potatoes**

At first, “Europeans looked upon the potato with fear and contempt.”² But the climate and soil of northern Europe were well-suited to growing potatoes. Potatoes have become an important source of nutrition for many countries.



From New World to Old World: **other foods**, including beans (lima, butter, kidney, and many others), peanuts, sweet potatoes, manioc (cassava or tapioca), squashes, pumpkins, papaya, guava, avocado, pineapple, tomatoes, chili peppers, strawberries, and cocoa beans

¹ Crosby, Alfred W., Jr. 1972. *The Columbian Exchange. Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, p. 171.

² *The Columbian Exchange*, p. 182.

ACTIVITY 20.2, CONTINUED



From Old World to New World: **other foods**, including wheat, coffee, beans, rice, and lettuce

NEGATIVE IMPACTS

From Old World to New World: **diseases that devastate humans**

Because they were separated from the rest of the world, Native Americans had no prior contact with smallpox and other deadly diseases. This made the diseases more dangerous than they were for Europeans. Between 1500 and 1650, large numbers of Native Americans died from measles, smallpox, influenza, and other diseases.³



From Old World to New World: **diseases that devastate animals**

European animals brought diseases with them that attacked llamas and alpacas.



From Old World to New World: **rat infestation**

Rats hitched rides on ships carrying English settlers in the 17th century. The rats infested the Bermuda islands and “set off one of the most spectacular . . . disasters of the age. . . . The rats spread to all the islands . . . and nearly ate the colonists out of house and home.”⁴



From New World to Old World: **sand fleas**

Sand fleas, or chiggers, are insects that penetrate human skin. When they deposit eggs under the skin, they can cause dangerous infections.



From Old World to New World: **exploitation of workers and slavery**

Many explorers wanted to find gold and silver in the New World. They used any means available to them to bring these riches back to Europe. The loss of life from war and disease created a shortage of labor. Europeans turned to Africa to fill their needs for workers. Between 8 and 10.5 million slaves were forced to produce tobacco, rice, coffee, and sugar.⁵

Native Americans were employed through slavery and the Spanish system of “encomienda,” which granted a person responsibility for a certain number of natives. Those who received the grant had to protect the natives and provide instruction in the Spanish language and the Catholic faith. Natives were forced to provide tribute in the form labor, gold, or other products.⁶

³ For an example of how Native Americans in Florida may have been affected, see Mintz, S. 2007. “European Discovery of the New World.” *Digital History*. Retrieved July 29, 2011 from <http://www.digital-history.uh.edu> (<http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/historyonline/us1.cfm>).

⁴ *The Columbian Exchange*, p. 97.

⁵ *The Columbian Exchange*, p. 213.

⁶ Rodriguez, J.P. *Encyclopedia of Slave Resistance*, Vol. 1. 2007. Westport CT: Greenwood Press, p.184.