

In the Wake of Columbus Background Information (for teachers)

Native peoples of the Americas had been genetically and epidemiologically isolated from Europe for 12,000 to 30,000 years. The Bering Land Bridge acted as a filter to keep out Old World diseases. Additionally, the people indigenous to the Americas had only a handful of domesticated animals from which disease organisms could pass to man. During this same time period in Europe, however, there had been rapid evolution of disease organisms, such as measles, mumps, smallpox, tuberculosis, and other pathogens. The native peoples of the Americas were spared contact with these organisms, but by the same token, never had the opportunity to develop resistance and immunity to these diseases as the Europeans had. Consequently, when the Europeans arrived in significant numbers, beginning with Columbus, native peoples contracted these diseases easily and died in large numbers. It is generally thought that many more died of disease than died of warfare. In many areas, so many people were ill at the same time that no one was available to nurse the sick. In fact, many people who otherwise might have survived the disease died of starvation or dehydration instead. Natives sometimes fled their stricken homes in fear when a new disease arrived and inadvertently spread the disease far beyond the areas actually visited by the Europeans. Overwork, suicide, infanticide, and lowered fertility are other factors that caused the decline of the native populations. It has been estimated that the mortality rate could have been 90% to 95% for the natives after the European influx began.

This lesson uses “high-middle” range figures or widely accepted estimates of mortality for indigenous people. Overall, current estimates for the entire New World range from 75 to 100 million, with at least one scholar arguing for 125 million. By contrast, Europe had an estimated population of 80 million, of which only 7 million were in Spain. Population figures for later dates are somewhat easier to estimate, based on censuses and other records.

IN THE WAKE OF COLUMBUS TIMELINE

DECLINE OF NATIVE PEOPLES

The Central Andes (The Incas)

1520 _____

1540 _____

1560 _____

1570 _____

1620 _____

Central Mexico (The Aztecs)

1518 _____

1532 _____

1548 _____

1568 _____

1580 _____

1595 _____

1608 _____

Hispaniola (present-day Haiti and Dominican Republic)

1492 _____

1508 _____

1514 _____

1550 _____

**GRAPH OF THE
NATIVE POPULATION OF THE CENTRAL ANDES**

14,000,000

12,000,000

10,000,000

8,000,000

6,000,000

4,000,000

2,000,000

1520

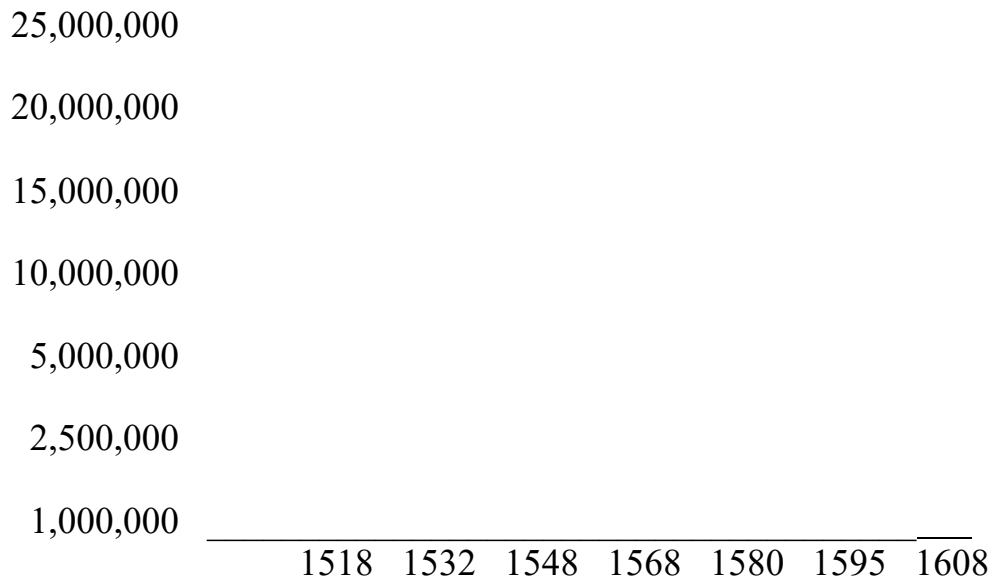
1540

1560

1570

1620

GRAPH OF THE NATIVE POPULATION OF CENTRAL MEXICO



GRAPH OF THE NATIVE POPULATION OF HISPANIOLA

