

FACT SHEET

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Timber & Timber Harvesting in West Virginia

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Were Native Americans Loggers?

The title of this fact sheet could be subtitled “Did Columbus find pristine wilderness in the Americas?” The answer is not certain, but new scientific studies indicate that the answer is probably “no.” Many scholars in the archaeological community are now convinced that the statement in our nations’ Wilderness Act of 1964 that our land when Columbus arrived was essentially “untrammeled by man,” is incorrect.

This raises the question as to the size of the indigenous population when Columbus arrived. One of the first estimates, made nearly a century ago, estimated the population of the Americas as being slightly more than one million inhabitants. About 35 years ago this was changed when a researcher, after decades of work, published that the population of the time may have been as high as 112 million. If correct, this means that the population of the Americas in 1492 was more than the population of Europe. The battleground as you might suspect moved rapidly from the scientific to the political. In 1998, another book said the high numbers are suspect, but more recent work argues against this.

All of the articles and books on the subject, and there are now dozens of them, are filled with stories of the first visitors, villages they visited, human diseases brought by the Europeans and the disappearance of the villages. Among the quotations is that Cortés was “dazzled by the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán which was “bigger than Paris, Europe’s greatest metropolis” and John Smith, of Pocahontas fame, in discussing a visit to Massachussets in 1614 said the land was “so planated with Gardens and Corne fields, and so well inhabited with a goodly, strong and well proportioned people...[that] I would rather live here than any where.” Others scientists say the current Amazonia rain forest may all be second growth after extensive clearing by native Americans.

The below cited summary article discusses that the high numbers of passenger pigeons, buffalo and elk we know were present in past centuries were numerous primarily because the native peoples who kept them in check had died out. In essence, anyone wanting to return the continent to the 1491 state, “will have to find it within themselves to create the world’s largest garden.”

The answer to the question in the title is, of course, uncertain, but there is more and more evidence that “native Americans managed the continent as they saw fit” for human purposes and, if correct, the trees that were in the Americas when Columbus arrived were certainly not as were here when humans first arrived. They had already been harvested, perhaps more than once.

An article entitled 1491 by Charles C. Mann published in the March, 2002 *Atlantic Monthly* and again, with permission, in the *Consultant* of Spring 2002 is a great summation of this very important topic. References to books on the topic are also given in the article.

(Prepared by William H. Gillespie)

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