



## Unit 4 D - The rise of Mesoamerican empires: Aztec and Incan empires before 1500

### Population and Settlement Patterns of the Americas During the Pre-encounter Period

#### Social Studies Standards - World History and Geography

*Key Ideas and Performance Indicators* 2.4.4, 3.1.3, 3.2.5

#### Skills:

- Identify cause and effect
- Compare and contrast ideas
- Draw inferences and make conclusions
- Get, use, analyze, interpret, and present information
- Understand the historical context of time and place in which events occur
- Identify basic assumptions
- Handle diversity of interpretations

#### Concepts:

Continuity/Change

Culture

Diversity/Unity

Movement of People and Goods

Places and Regions

#### Historical Context:

Many Americans have only a vague sense of what the Americas were like prior to 1492, an image that is often dominated by old stereotypes of feathered headdresses and tepees. The world created by Native Americans was much more diverse and densely populated than previously believed.

The Native American societies varied a great deal from each other, ranging from simple non-sedentary bands, through semi-sedentary agricultural and hunting tribes of moderate population, to fully sedentary empires of millions of people who built great cities and exhibited social, political, religious, artistic, and economic complexity. While the best guesses on population levels ranged from 8.4 to 15.5 million up to the 1950s, scholars now argue for population figures of between 35 and 110 million.

In addition, the settlement patterns created by Native Americans prior to 1492 continued to be important after

the arrival of the Europeans. For example, the sedentary areas were sedentary because of a combination of rich environments and human effort. Naturally, Europeans were most drawn to these sedentary regions, whose wealth and complexity were much like Europe itself. Thus, once students grasp the pre-1492 sedentary patterns, they can easily understand why Europeans concentrated in certain areas and largely ignored others.

[Handout 1](#): *Settlement Patterns of Native Americans During the Pre-encounter Period*

[Handout 2](#): *Populations of the Americas Circa 1492*

[Handout 3a](#): *Population Statistics*

[Handout 3b](#): *Methods Used by Social Scientists To Estimate Populations of the Past*

[Handout 4](#): *The Demographic Impact of the European Encounter*

[Handout 5](#): *Expert Opinions*

### **Activities:**

Have students examine [Handout 1](#), *Settlement Patterns of Native Americans During the Pre-contact Period*. Discuss the terms sedentary, semi-sedentary, and non-sedentary cultures. Also have students identify the following regions: Ask students to examine [Handout 2](#), "Populations of the Americas Circa 1492," and draw some conclusions regarding the population of the Americas during the pre-encounter period.

- What were the populations of the six regions in millions?
- Which region of the Americas had the densest population? The sparsest?
- What percentage of the total Native American population did the population of Mexico represent? North America? The Andes?
- What factors are needed to support a large population?

Fill a large jar with jellybeans, with groups of red, yellow, etc, together. Use the jar to show students that there were many indigenous groups living in the Americas in 1492 (the colors represent different groups). Explain that some were sedentary, some semi-sedentary, and others were non-sedentary. Show on a map where the groups lived and where Columbus landed. Using the jar, show how difficult it is to *estimate* the number of people living in the Americas in 1492. Discuss how the groups differed in level of complexity.

[Handout 3a](#), *Population Statistics*, is background information for the teacher for an activity on establishing population statistics. Discuss the lack of reliability in determining population statistics and the various processes

of establishing populations of the past. Ask the students to discuss the following questions:

- How would you estimate the size of a crowd at a football game?
- If the police said that there were 200,000 people at an outdoor concert, and the performers said there were 350,000, whom would you believe? On what basis could the estimates have been made? What biases might there be in making the estimates?
- How can the perspective of demographers affect accurate counts?
- Why do social scientists feel that it is important to be able to estimate the population of people who lived 500 years ago?
- Assuming the recent and larger population figures for Native Americans to be true, how does this fit with previous image of the Americas before 1492?
- How might these larger numbers of Native Americans affect understanding of the encounter?
- What happened to these large populations after the Encounter?

Social Scientists disagree as to the full impact of the Encounter upon the Native American population. Have students work in small groups and examine [Handout 4](#), "The Demographic Impact of the European Encounter."

As students evaluate this handout, have them compile a list of ways in which the Encounter affected the lives of the Native Americans.

- Why did it take generations before the full impact of the Encounter was known?
- What evidence is there that disease followed the trade routes of the world?

Before the class examines [Handout 5](#), establish four groups. Assign ONE quote from the handout to each group. Each group should discuss:

- What does the writer mean?
- Do you agree with the point of view of the quote?
- How does the information in the quote contribute to our knowledge about Native American populations in the pre-encounter period?