

Native Americans, Colonists & Nature

Introduction

In 1667, a Dutch colonist named Arent van Curler joined Mohawk Native Americans on a journey from Upstate New York to Quebec.

Their journey brought them over Lake George where there is a rock which was sacred to the Mohawk people. They believed an old spirit lived on that rock who controlled the winds. So, they stopped and gave an offering of tobacco to the spirit in the hope that he might make the wind blow in their favor.

When he saw this, the Dutchman began to mock the ritual and according to the primary source he, quote, “Turned up his backside towards the rock.” He mooned it. Later on, his canoe flipped over and he drowned.¹ So maybe there was a spirit there, I don’t know.

What I do know is that Native Americans and European colonists occupied the same land but interacted with their environment in very different ways. For Natives, nature was filled with spiritual forces, some harmful, some helpful. The world needed to be navigated through ritual and reciprocity. The forces which inhabited nature needed to be respected. In the European worldview, nature was something to possess, to conquer and own.

By looking at both groups’ use of the land, we can better understand the relationships between Native Americans and European colonists. We can see how they viewed the world around them. And how their differing views on nature added to the conflict between the groups and remade the land itself.

This method is called environmental history. If you’re unfamiliar with it, it can seem a bit odd at first.

It considers how humans relate to the world around them. How they’ve been shaped by natural forces and how humans have related with and transformed nature. It’s history that places mankind in its physical environment. Today we’re going to use environmental history to add a new dimension to our understanding of Native Americans and European colonists.

— *Intro Music* —

[Welcome to American History Remix, the podcast about the overlooked and underexplored aspects of American history. We’re glad you’re here!]

¹ Daniel. K. Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 14.

Geography

Before we can talk about how humans related to their environment, we have to talk about the land itself. Last episode we began the story with the Bering Strait, the land bridge which connected Asia and North America. Today we're going to back up even further, all the way to Pangea, 180 million years ago. Pangea was a super continent, the only land mass in the world. But as tectonic plates shifted the continent began to break apart and the land gradually, very gradually, drifted into its present state. North America as a separate land mass, came into existence around 60 million years ago.

Throughout this episode and in later episodes we use the terms "Old" and "New World." That's because even though the Americas are 60 million years old, they were the last continents to be inhabited by humans. Besides Antarctica, which doesn't count because no one lives there and it's just a bunch of penguins.

All this may seem like an unnecessary thing to cover, but it's actually crucial. From that point on, the Americas developed in isolation. All lifeforms, plants, animals, germs, developed independently from the rest of the world.²

Over the last 10 million years, there were at least seven episodes of mass extinction in North America. The last one was about 10,000 years ago and it took out much of the megafauna, the large mammals native to the continent. These were animals like mammoths, camels, cheetahs, lions, horses, saber-toothed cats, and beavers. That's right, there were giant beavers, the size of bears. Awesome, right? But these animals were driven to extinction by the end of the Pleistocene Epoch, commonly known as the last Ice Age. The rise in temperature, as the Earth emerged from the Ice Age, was too dramatic for these large creatures.

As a result, the Americas were left without many of the large animals whose relatives still existed in Eurasia and Africa. In the Old World, there over a dozen large animals which societies domesticated and relied upon for food, clothing, and transportation. Cows, donkeys, horses, pigs, stuff like that. In the Americas, there was only one such animal, the llama. This fact alone reveals the vast difference between the two worlds.³

When we study early American history, we use certain labels for the actors. We designate people as Native American, European, African. And that's perfectly fine. But those designations don't mean anything if we don't recognize how those people came from separate geographic areas with their own environment and history. But once we do get this, we can then turn and consider the unique features of those groups.

Natives and the Land

For Native Americans in the northeast of the continent, the environment was not purely physical. The world was permeated with spirits. "Other-than-human" persons inhabited the wind, water, trees, everything around them. These forces were not inherently good or evil any more than

² Theodore Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3.

³ Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, 12-13.

humans, what mattered was the relationship with these forces. Good favor required a sort of “ceremonial maintenance.”

So, Natives relied on Shaman, whose knowledge of ceremonies helped them maintain proper relationships to the “other-than-human” forces. Reciprocity was key to these relationships; you offer tobacco and the spirit gives you favorable wind. It was an exchange.

Relationships with these forces were flexible, not exclusive, or fixed. There were many non-human forces to interact with. These relationships could evolve overtime just as human relationships might. I ask my coworker for help fixing my car then buy him a beer to say thanks. But then I may take a new job and not see him as often. The relationship evolves.

You may need the wind to blow in your favor when you want to hunt animals across the lake, but then they migrate, and you don’t need the wind to make that journey anymore. The relationship evolves.

This way of relating to the environment and spiritual world was also how Natives in the region related to each other. Reciprocity and restitution governed both spiritual and daily life. They secured alliances by exchanging gifts. Wrongs required compensation.

Already, by looking at how Native Americans in the North Atlantic viewed nature we’ve gained insight into how they related to Europeans. What sense could the Protestant worldview make to Native Americans? The absolutism and fixed nature would seem bizarre. Good angels, evil demons, a supreme God who required exclusive worship; free grace offered to sinners without restitution; these were all foreign ideas.

But Catholicism? That was actually relatable. Priests were like Shaman, persons with the knowledge and power to mediate with the spiritual world. Prayers and rituals were like ceremonies. Even things like the celibacy of priests wasn’t that different than what a Shaman might require of a people trying to appease the spirits. These practices would at least have been recognizable to Native observers.

And because France was a Catholic nation, their colonists in America, at least early on, had a distinct advantage in relating to Native Americans over their English and Protestant counterparts.⁴

Unlike the English who sealed agreements through signing a treaty, the French were able to join in the Native system of diplomacy, that is, through gift giving. One French missionary remarked that gifts “dry up tears, they appease anger...they deliver prisoners.”⁵ The two people groups became mutually dependent. French traders provided new materials to Native communities such as metals, firearms, cloth, and alcohol. French traders received furs. And Europeans loved their furs.⁶ The relationship between the French and Natives is beyond the scope of this episode. But we’re going to talk about it more in the future.

⁴ Richter, *Facing East*, 83-86.

⁵ Alan Taylor, *American Colonies: The Settling of North America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 96.

⁶ Taylor, *American Colonies*, 92-94.

For now, we need to recognize that gift giving was how Natives related to the environment and spiritual world, it shaped how they related to each other, and how they related to the outsiders that arrived on their shores.

The farming practices of Native Americans differed from, and in many ways were more efficient than, their European counterparts. European farmers planted crops in designated fields. This field for wheat, that field for barley, etc. But growing the same crop year after year, depletes the soil of nutrients like nitrogen, potassium, and phosphorus.⁷ This is why they developed the system of crop rotation, letting certain plots lay bare each year to regenerate the soil.

Native Americans avoided this practice by letting various crops grow together, which prevented the soil from losing its nutrients. They let corn, beans and squash grow together in the same plot, which required little tending and when eaten created a nutritious meal.⁸

They also practiced controlled fires. Periodically burning the brush on the forest floor drove wild animals and helped replenish the soil with nutrients.⁹

There was also a flexibility to this pattern of farming. Despite the multi-plant method of farming and controlled burnings, nutrients in the soil still depleted after years of constant use. This led villages to relocate every generation or so. In fact, villages near the coast that depended on both agriculture and fishing would frequently migrate twice annually, moving close to either food source as the season required.¹⁰

So, all in all, there was a flexibility to the Native American use of land. Crops grew together, villages would sometimes relocate, and there were evolving relationships with the spirits which inhabited the physical world.

The English and the Land

The English had a very different view of the environment and how humans ought to live within it. Let's focus on them now. Land ownership was at the center of England's social structure. The monarch was the head of English society. Below that was the aristocracy and landed gentry. But these groups made up only about 5% of the English population. The vast majority had no land of their own. And this was a big deal. In order to vote for members in the House of Commons, adult men were required to own land.¹¹ So, land was tied to power.

And these beliefs about land influenced how they colonized America. The English practiced primogeniture which meant the oldest male was the heir of his father's land and wealth. This left many second and third sons without an inheritance. It was these men who made up many of the early settlers in the colonies.

⁷ Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, 72.

⁸ Richter, *Facing East*, 55-56.

⁹ William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003), 50.

¹⁰ Richter, *Facing East*, 57.

¹¹ Taylor, *American Colonies*, 119-20.

But the opportunity of new land was only half the equation. Fear of the landless was the other half. Those who had land were very suspicious of those who did not. And the population in England had grown dramatically in the 16th century, but the economy had not kept up. This added to the number of poor and vagrant. To the landed aristocracy, this was terrifying. Fear of the poor and landless was so serious that one writer promoted the idea of simply enslaving all the poor rather than risk a social upheaval. There was another option though: export them to America. During the first decade and a half in the Chesapeake Bay, most of the indentured servants had been forcibly removed from England.¹²

There were the landless who chose to move, and the landless who were forced to move. Either way, land was central to English colonialism.

As we discussed in the previous episode on colonization (go check that out if you haven't already), English colonization began at home. When they reached America, they brought with them the colonizing practices and justifications they had used when subjugating and incorporating Wales, Scotland, and Ireland into their kingdom. English beliefs about land ownership and its proper use was central to this practice.

For the English, land meant power, status, civility. This helps explain why the English engaged in settler colonialism, with permanent settlements in North America. Other empires practiced different kinds of colonialism.

There is one more factor to consider here and that's the colonist's understanding of disease. We discussed disease in our last episode, and we'll discuss it again in the future. That's because it is so important. Disease decimated the Native American population. Hard numbers are difficult to reach but current estimates suggest that in the century and a half after contact, some 80 million Native Americans died. Those are continental estimates. Specific communities often experienced up to a 90% mortality rate. For me, this is a difficult stat to get my head around. 90%.¹³

And again, looking at the environment helps us understand this process. Think about the geographic features we discussed a moment ago. After the Bering Strait disappeared, the Old and New Worlds became isolated from each other and Natives had no exposure to Old-World diseases like smallpox, measles, whooping cough, and chicken pox. The extinction of many large mammals in the Americas removed the source for many diseases. Native Americans were not without sickness. But overall, they had fewer severe diseases compared to the Old World. Unfortunately, when they did encounter Old World diseases, they had no immunity to them.

In the 1630s, for example, a smallpox epidemic broke out among the Algonquian Natives of New England. This ravaged the whole community. Without any knowledge of microbes and immune systems, European colonists tried to make sense of what was happening. When they saw Native Americans die before them, many interpreted this as an act of God. He was clearing the

¹² Taylor, *American Colonies*, 122, 142; Edmund S. Morgan, "Slavery and Freedom: The American Paradox," *The Journal of American History* 59, no. 1 (June 1972): 10.

¹³ Taylor, *American Colonies*, 39-40; Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty!: An American History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011), 23-24.

continent for them, giving them possession of the land.¹⁴ This interpretation of disease explains a lot of their behavior.

Cultural Differences

The contrasting views of land and nature present among Native Americans and the English created all sorts of issues when the two groups met.

The English believed permanent settlements indicated civilized society. So, they saw the nomadic or semi-nomadic behavior of Natives as savagery. To most, Native Americans were like mere animals inhabiting the wilderness. They did not recognize Native farming methods and believed they weren't properly using the land. The language colonists used at the time captures these beliefs well. John Winthrop, a Puritan governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony, called Natives "a savage people" who's claim to the land was illegitimate because "they inclose no ground" and did not "improve the land."¹⁵ Anyone who entered such a wilderness and set about making improvements was entitled to own it. Thus, English colonists justified taking the land.¹⁶

For the English, farming was the true work of a man. Hunting and fishing were seen as leisurely activities, they were sport. So, when they saw Native men hunting deer and fishing for food, they did not recognize it as real labor and believed Indian men were lazy.

The reverse it also true. For Native Americans, it was a woman's role to plant and grow crops. So, they saw Englishmen working the fields as a backwards practice.¹⁷

It wasn't like Native Americans had no understanding of territorialism or tribal land rights. They just had no private property. And most Natives in colonial New England were nomadic or semi-nomadic, moving with the seasons. Instead of claiming land itself, Natives claimed what existed on it, such as berries, acorns, fish, or game animals.¹⁸

When Natives sold or gave colonists a piece of land, the two sides were expressing different things. Early on, Natives believed they were simply allowing colonists the inclusive rights to use the land, not the exclusive right to own it. The English bought and sold, not the right to use the land, but the land itself.¹⁹ You can see why this would cause some issues between the groups.

Finally, the idea of owning live animals was as foreign as owning land. Sure, a dead animal was your property to share with your family, but legally claiming an animal before it was dead was a new and foreign concept to Native Americans.²⁰

¹⁴ Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, 27-28.

¹⁵ Virginia DeJohn Anderson, "King Philip's Herds: Indians, Colonists, and the Problem of Livestock in Early New England," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (Oct. 1994): 604; Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, 31.

¹⁶ Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, 14, 31-32.

¹⁷ Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 52.

¹⁸ Anderson, "King Philip's Herds," 604; Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, 14, 31-32.

¹⁹ Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 68; Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, 31-32.

²⁰ Anderson, "King Philip's Herds," 606.

The two differing world views capture and explain the conflicts between colonists and Natives. No wonder there were tensions and bloodshed, they were competing for the same resources and operating from fundamentally different philosophies and assumptions about the physical world.

Remaking the Land

Environmental history doesn't just reveal the way these cultures thought about land, it also shows us how Natives and European colonists remade the land itself.

The fur trade is the best example. Europeans were hungry for furs, especially beaver furs. And Natives were eager to hunt and trade beaver in exchange for European goods. This led to the overhunting of beavers. The pools of water that formed behind beaver dams created a habitat for insects and plankton, which are food sources for fish. Large animals like bears and deer relied on these pools for food. Bears ate the fish and deer ate plants which grew on and lived in the fallen trees of dams. The decrease in beavers meant fewer dams, and fewer dams meant this entire ecosystem broke down.

It also led to the erosion of the soil. Dams would naturally breakdown over time. This would drain the ponds and leave behind nutrient rich soil that created meadows which could feed animals and Natives alike. But again, with the decrease in the beaver population, there weren't new dams to replace the old and this cycle was effectually ended.²¹

European farming methods also changed the land and impacted the farming, hunting, and gathering of Native Americans.

Large pack animals did not exist in the Americas like they did in Europeans. There was the bison on the great plains, but it was never domesticated. And Natives in New England had never needed to protect their crops from such animals. But the colonists introduced new animals to the region such as cattle, sheep, and, what was by far the most destructive, pigs.

Part of the problem was that colonists changed their farming practices in America. In England, farmers would fence in their animals and leave fields open; in America, settlers reversed this pattern. New Englanders took advantage of natural forage by allowing their animals to roam and fencing their fields to keep the animals out.²² Furthermore, colonists often let these animals graze outside their own villages.

So, these new animals often wandered into, trampled, and ate from the unfenced land belonging to Native Americans.²³

Pigs often roamed on the shores would eat wild clams before they could be gathered by Native women. Even though Native leaders complained to English about the roaming animals, their complaints often fell on deaf ears.²⁴

²¹ Richter, *Facing East*, 53-54

²² Anderson, "King Philip's Herds," 604.

²³ Anderson, "King Philip's Herds," 607-08.

²⁴ Anderson, "King Philip's Herds," 607-08.

But the issues didn't stop there. European farming methods consisted of large permanent plots with a single crop. To make room for these plots, colonists cut down the forests around their villages. This reduced Native hunting grounds and destroyed the naturally growing plants which had long been a source of food for Native Americans.²⁵

So, the land was transformed, ecosystems destroyed, forests cleared, and food sources eliminated. Add this to the crippling effects of disease, and you get a sense how the English dispossessed Natives of the land. The pattern was not uniform or immediate, but over time Native communities were forced to abandon their traditional lands and relocate to the interior of the continent, farther away from the encroaching colonies.

Cultures Transformed

The ripple effects of these environmental changes transformed cultures as well.

Just like their Old-World counterparts, Native Americans had a long history of adaptation. Their cultures evolved over time. So, when Europeans introduced new animals, plants, and raw materials, Native Americans incorporated them into their society.

At first, Native Americans embraced many of these new goods but used them within their own cultural context. As late as 1600, Natives primarily used European goods as raw materials that they could refashion and use for their own purposes or as status symbols. A copper kettle would get cut up into small pieces and turned into ritual items, jewelry, cutting implements, or weapons. Or, iron from axes and knives would be reprocessed into needles, or other tools.²⁶ In essence, they treated European products as raw materials they could use to create familiar goods.

But after sustained contact, Native communities began using goods in traditionally European ways. As permanent, large-scale European colonies dotted the landscape, trade opened-up more to Native communities. Over time, Natives treated European goods less as raw materials and instead let them replace traditional items. Brass kettles replaced ceramic pots, iron axes replaced stone celts, and woolen blankets replaced animal skins.²⁷

These new goods affected the everyday life of Native Americans. It even changed how they cooked food.

Prior to the introduction of metals, Native Americans cooked food with tools made of clay and ate food from clay pots or earthenware and wooden troughs. But these broke easily and the materials were scarce. Metal kettles and ladles replaced these goods. They were more durable and could be placed directly over flames. Natives began to use European axes to chop wood and used flint and steel to light fires. What did all this mean? More warm meals. This may seem like a small thing, but it shows how far reaching these adaptations were. This process touched all areas of life.²⁸

²⁵ Richter, *Facing East*, 58-59.

²⁶ Richter, *Facing East*, 42-43.

²⁷ Richter, *Facing East*, 43-44.

²⁸ Richter, *Facing East*, 44.

Natives still used these items according to their own customs, but they were embracing a new material culture.

They also embraced new animals. Most tribes in the North Atlantic region, as we have seen, were semi-nomadic.²⁹ But as Native Americans embraced the practice of keeping pack animals, this system was disrupted. Mobilizing animal herds is not easy. Nor is it easy to shelter and feed livestock during winter.

They also disrupted hunting practices. You can't take a herd of pigs with you when you go on a hunting expedition. Not if you want to catch anything.

This meant it was harder for Natives to migrate and encouraged them to stay in one settled location.

Now we have to talk about horses. We've focused mostly on New England but let's look further west for a moment. As the Spanish colonized the southwest, they introduced cattle, sheep, and horses.³⁰ These three animals dramatically reshaped the landscape, but the horse arguably had the most effect on Native society.

The value of horses was obvious to the Spanish. They were at first reluctant to trade them to indigenous people. However, over time, many horses escaped and became feral. Native people would then capture and domesticate the wild horses.

In some cases, Natives just took horses from colonists. In the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, Natives revolted against the Spanish in New Mexico and took horses, cattle, and sheep as their spoils. Then the Natives started to trade these animals with other tribes. Native American groups in Texas were trading horses by the 1690s. By the 1780s, horses were in the Columbia plateau in the Pacific Northwest.³¹

The effects of this were massive. Horses helped Natives defend against Europeans. They also changed the dynamics of warfare between tribes and they increased their ability to move across great distances while carrying goods. And because horses made hunting easier, they created a surplus of food and thereby increased trade.³² That's a pretty big impact for one animal to have.

Let's return now to New England. The transformation of culture was not single-sided. Colonial and European societies were also transformed by the new material world. Spain became the wealthiest kingdom in Europe because of the gold they imported from the Americas. The English didn't find gold in their Atlantic colonies, but they did find tobacco.

Tobacco was unique because it had no Old-World counterpart. The Spanish knew about gold before they found any in America. The French and English knew about animal fur before they

²⁹ Richter, *Facing East*, 57.

³⁰ Carolyn Merchant, *The Columbia Guide to American Environmental History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 10.

³¹ Merchant, *The Columbia Guide to American Environmental History*, 16-17.

³² Alfred W. Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2003), 101-106.

began trading with Native Americans. But not tobacco. The earliest European accounts didn't even know how to describe smoking. They used phrases like "drinking smoke" because they didn't know how else to explain it.³³

And again, the plant represents the vast cultural divide between Natives and English Colonists. Native Americans had been using tobacco since before Christ. Its popularity was widespread in North America though its exact use differed regionally. For many, the plant held a religious significance and was used in ceremonies and offerings.³⁴

Early on, many colonists, though not all, could not separate the plant from Native American religious use of it. The plant itself was part of Native heathenism.³⁵

Eventually, however, Europeans realized the usefulness and pleasures of tobacco and the crop took off. It was imported into France in 1561 and England in the 1580s. By the early 1600s it had spread to everywhere in Europe.³⁶ The demand for tobacco created an opportunity for Virginia. Producing the crop essentially saved the colony. One historian called it the "economic salvation of Virginia."³⁷

In colonial Maryland, they even used it as currency. You want a marriage license? You pay in tobacco. You get fined by the courts? Those fines were measured in pounds of tobacco. During the Revolutionary War, the colonies had to give collateral to France in exchange for loans. Part of their collateral—tobacco.³⁸ What was Don Draper trying to sell in the first episode of *Mad Men*? Tobacco.

So, European and colonial economies incorporated and, in some cases, were centered around a New World crop. We're going to talk more about the global impact of these new resources in a future episode. For now, we need to recognize how no one, not Natives nor colonists, were left unchanged when the Old and New Worlds met.

King Philip's War

With all of the factors we've been discussing in mind, let's turn to a key event in the history colonial New England—King Philip's War. This was a conflict between Native Americans and colonists in 1675-76. The war derives its name from Metacom, whose English name was Philip, the leader of the Wampanoag tribe in New England.

The Wampanoag allied themselves with Plymouth colony in 1621.³⁹ However, relations between Natives and colonists had deteriorated since then. The dynamic was shifting away from one of

³³ Peter C. Mancall, "Tales Tobacco Told in Sixteenth-Century Europe," *Environmental History* 9, no. 4 (2004): 649-50.

³⁴ Mancall, "Tales Tobacco Told," 651.

³⁵ Mancall, "Tales Tobacco Told," 651-52.

³⁶ Nathan Nunn and Nancy Qian, "The Columbian Exchange: A History of Disease, Food, and Ideas," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 24, no. 2 (2010): 176.

³⁷ Mancall, "Tales Tobacco Told," 667.

³⁸ Nunn and Qian, "The Columbian Exchange," 176.

³⁹ Richter, *Facing East*, 98.

mutual allies towards one of domination by the colonists. After Philip's father died in 1661, his brother Wamsutta became the leader of the Wampanoag. The following year Plymouth suspected Wamsutta was forming a Native conspiracy and demanded he appear in court to explain himself. When he refused, he was seized at gunpoint and brought before Governor Thomas Prince despite suffering from a fever. Wamsutta was released but died before he could reach home. Then, Philip became leader of the Wampanoag, and the deterioration continued. In 1671, Plymouth forced him to sign a treaty agreeing that Natives would be subject to the colonial government. Then, there was a mysterious death of a Native who had converted to Christianity. Colonists suspected he was killed by his fellow Natives because he worked with Plymouth colony. His death ignited the conflict that had been brewing between the two sides.⁴⁰

Philip began preparing for war against Plymouth in 1675 and nearly every Algonquin group in New England joined his side. There were about ninety colonial towns in the region. Natives attacked over fifty of them and outright destroyed twelve of them.⁴¹

Fighting lasted until 1676 when colonists, with the help of a few Natives who aligned themselves with the settlers, were able to corner Philip and his forces in a swamp and kill him.⁴² After the war, Natives in the region lost nearly all the land in New England that they had possessed.⁴³

These are the basic facts of King Philip's War. But there is much more going on below the surface. Virtually every aspect of the conflict was shaped by the environment.

First, when the Wampanoag tribe allied with Plymouth in 1621, they had recently been devastated by disease. There is even some debate among historians whether the Wampanoag were even a unified group before this, or if they were simply the survivors of various groups ravaged by disease.

In this relatively weak condition, their alliance with Plymouth was mutually beneficial because the colonists were also in a precarious situation. How did they help Plymouth? They gave them corn and taught them to grow it, and then the two celebrated the first Thanksgiving.

Second, Philip himself represents the way the two separate cultures were interacting. He owned pigs, the most destructive of the animals the English brought to America, which shows how Natives were adapting to a new way of life with a new environment.⁴⁴

Third, the growing conflict was exacerbated by the availability of natural resources, or their lack of availability rather, the collapse of the fur trade first and foremost. Beavers, as we discussed earlier, were overhunted and when they were gone, Wampanoag Natives lost access to the colonial trade. Meanwhile, the wampum bead trade also faltered. Without these other resources,

⁴⁰ Richter, *Facing East*, 102-103.

⁴¹ Richter, *Facing East*, 104.

⁴² Richter, *Facing East*, 104-105.

⁴³ Colin G. Calloway, *The World Turned Upside Down: Indian Voices from Early America* (Boston: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 8.

⁴⁴ Anderson, "King Philip's Herds," 602; Richter, *Facing East*, 97, 105.

Natives in New England had only one resource which the colonists desired. Can you guess?
Land.⁴⁵

Fourth, the method of warfare represents the conflicting uses of land. Domesticated animals were crucial for colonial survival, and those animals wreaked havoc on Native land. Natives usually used every part of a dead animal. But cows came to represent the conflict between the parties. During King Phillip's War they slaughtered cows belonging to the colonists and left them to rot in the fields. It was a symbol and a message.⁴⁶ How did colonists respond to the attacks? By burning Native fields. This created serious food shortages during the winter of 1675-1676 which significantly weakened Philip's forces.⁴⁷

Disease, animals, land ownership, overhunting, and cultural adaptation—all of these factors shaped New England, the its Native and colonial inhabitants.

Conclusion

Including the natural environment in our histories adds a depth to our understanding of the past. In the first summary of King Philip's War, there weren't any factual errors. But the story was missing something. The facts were all out of context. That's because, individuals were not actors on an empty stage. They interacted with, were shaped by, and in turn, shaped the physical world around them.

There are a lot of ways to look at the process of the Old and New Worlds meeting, at the tensions between Natives and colonists, and at the transformation of their societies. But often our stories of the past ignore the physical world. Environmental history widens our perspective. It looks at how individuals and societies understood the world around them, and how that physical environment affected them.

It helps us see how the Natives and colonists in the North Atlantic had opposing perspectives of the land. Native Americans believed the land was inhabited by spirits and governed through a system of ritual and reciprocity. The English believed the land was something to own and commodify and symbolized civility. The interaction between the two communities reshaped them both. And it remade the land they both inhabited.

Thanks for listening.

[American History Remix is written and produced by Will Schneider and Lyndsay Smith. We want to thank Sari Field, who designed our logo. If you need graphic design work, we highly recommend Sari. Visit her website at sarifield.com. Thats s-a-r-i-f-i-e-l-d.com. To learn more about America's past, visit AmericanHistoryRemix.com.]

⁴⁵ Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 103; Richter, *Facing East*, 100-102.

⁴⁶ Anderson, "King Philip's Herds," 623.

⁴⁷ Richter, *Facing East*, 104.

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