

Avis '25

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### Response to Prompt about Pre-colonized Native Americans

PROMPT: In a clear, developed paragraph, complicate the following dominant narrative/settler-colonial myth of indigenous peoples: *Pre-colonized Native Americans were “wandering Neolithic hunters” and ignorant savages who lived simple lives and had no impact on their environment.*

Precolonial Native Americans were critical parts of their respective ecosystems and used incredibly complex land management practices, and each Indigenous society contained varied and detailed social and political structures and ways of life—despite the way they have been characterized by colonizers. Many Native Nations practiced farming, but not in a way that was truly recognized by settlers. They played to the land’s natural strengths and enhanced it with fire, and also cultivated fields of specific crops in rotation. Due to a lack of domesticable animals in the New World, there was no need for fences—so right under the Jamestown settlers’ noses, “the Chesapeake Bay was a jumble of farm fields, marshes, deep forest, and secondary forest (young trees growing on abandoned plots)” that members of the Tsenacomoco empire cultivated throughout the region (Mann). Farming in pre-contact America was an organized, deliberate affair that worked with the environment and its cycles, but the natural aspects of it were misunderstood as unregulated and cluttered by settlers who drained the land of its nutrients with tobacco and unwittingly razed fields by loosing feral European livestock. When the land had been thoroughly ruined and its native people killed or relocated, the ecosystems suffered. The careful land practices that allowed forests and fields to thrive disappeared, and so, “No longer maintained by Indian burning, the shrinking forests of the East would become choked with underbrush--the overgrown, uninhabited ‘wilderness’ celebrated by Thoreau.

In the 1800s, the great grasslands of the Midwest, once kept open by native burning, began filling with trees" (Mann). There is, quite possibly, no greater tell of the impact of a people than what happens when they are gone, or at least very greatly diminished. Therefore, all of the large-scale environmental effects of the disenfranchisement of Native Americans that were seen across the country speak clearly to all of the ways Native people influenced the land they inhabited. The land that had been deemed uniformly "wild" by settlers displayed exactly what true wild looked like only after the civilizations maintaining it could not anymore. There were an uncountable number of variances between different Native tribes and nations throughout what is now the United States, though they were very often wrongly grouped together. Within these distinctions were vastly different forms of government and spirituality or religion. The Tsenacomoco empire on the Chesapeake Bay is one example of a wide-spanning organized nation in the New World, and it underwent change and expansion not recognized in the traditional view of Native peoples as simple and static. Before settlers landed at Jamestown, "Tsenacomoco had been a collection of six separate chiefdoms," but in the three intervening decades, "its paramount chief, Powhatan, had tripled its size to about 8,000 square miles and more than 14,000 people" (Mann).

This level of organization, with extensive territories and growing populations, is far removed from the colonizers' ideas of simple, primitive nomads. Tsenacomoco was truly an empire even by European standards, and there were a number of similar and very different Native Nations across the New World. The Shawnee had a comparable political structure, with "five major divisions, each further organized through a number of patrilineal clans. The position of civil chief was generally hereditary, while war chiefs were chosen for their bravery, skill, and experience" (Britannica). The Shawnee displayed a similar level of complexity and flexibility to Tsenacomoco, but with different leadership, ways of selecting leaders, power structures, and societal structures. Their daily lives involved an elaborate form of spirituality and ceremony that was distinct from every other form of religion on the continent, though many shared intricacies. For example, "Some Siouan tribes believed that before a child is born its soul stands before The Creator, to either reach for the bow and arrows that would indicate the role of a man or the basket that would determine the role of a female" (Brayboy). This

belief showcases both the intricate religious and spiritual beliefs in Native Nations, and their complex social roles and assigned jobs, based on gender in the Siouan example, but likely also on a variety of other factors. Precolumbian Native Americans were far from simple, and they shaped the land they lived on as much as it supported them.