

Lesson Plan

Why were First Nations peoples so vulnerable to Europeans' diseases, and not the other way around?

Context: This lesson will work best with a focused class. Although it seems to bite off a lot of content, most of it is delivered in easily digestible technical components, that will ultimately fit into a bigger picture.

Objectives and Rationale

While many sources describe the arrival of Europeans as being devastating to members of the First Nations, few touch on the actual mechanisms that brought this devastation about. By looking at these mechanisms, we are able to circumvent much more simplistic and prejudicial explanations, and help lead students to a more complete understanding.

Students will be able to trace the cause and effect from the domestication of animals to the devastating diseases that befell the Pacific Coast First Nations.

Relevant PLOs

- Assess the interaction between Aboriginal people and Europeans
- Analyse how geography influenced the economic, historical, and cultural development of western Canada

Resources

- Slides and appropriate presentation software
- World map
- Chalk/White board
- Excerpt from *The narrative of Samuel Hancock*

Activities and Strategies

Introduction: **5mins**

Begin with slides of picture from the Museum of Anthropology. Discuss background of the house and poles, noting the artistic expertise. The main point to take away from here, however, is where it is housed.

Notice they are now museum pieces housed in a building that is essentially a product of descendants of Europeans. The initial question is this:

“Why are these aboriginal artifacts in a museum built by “white people”, rather than “white people's”

artifacts being in aboriginal museums?"

Why were Europeans able to dominate the Americas, and subject its peoples? Why did the reverse not happen?

Brainstorming activity: **10 mins**

List advantages Aboriginal peoples had over Europeans, and vice versa. Draw students' attention to the point of disease, if they have not yet brought it up. This will be the factor that is closely examined in this lesson. The vast majority of First Nations to be killed by European contact died due to Eurasian illnesses, not homicide.

Lecture/discussion portion: **30 mins**

Why did the Europeans give many deadly diseases to Aboriginal peoples, and not the other way round?

We can begin by looking at where germs come from: those that cause acute and lethal illness came from herd animals.

Points to connect:

- Diseases that spread in epidemics (rapid, lethal waves of infection) require large populations. (these diseases would kill a small, isolated population before it had a chance to spread to the next host)
- Human populations large enough to sustain those diseases first appeared with the introduction of agriculture around 10,000 years ago
- These germs made a jump from herd animals (that were becoming domesticated), who already lived in populations large enough to support these germs

So large groups of humans need domesticated animals before they are infected by the germs that cause massive epidemics. Why did Europeans have many domesticated animals and Aboriginal groups did not?

- Eurasian herds were more plentiful and, by law of averages, possessed the traits that were conducive to domestication (social, large, rapid maturation, not flighty). These herds responded to the gradual presence of humans with domestication.
- North American animals first encountered humans only 11,000 years ago, as they crossed the Bering land bridge. The animals were unable to respond evolutionarily to the suddenly arrived, spear-throwing humans. Any would-be domesticates were lost in the Pleistocene extinctions.

Europeans then had a very long exposure to these lethal microbes. Many died, but some were genetically resistant (by chance) to the illness, and their children inherited the genes contributing to a more disease resistant population.

Examples of diseases that come from herd animals:

Measles, Smallpox – cattle

Flu – pigs and ducks

Aboriginal peoples had only a few domesticated animals that did not live in large herds (dogs, turkeys). As such, they had no epidemic diseases, and no immunity.

Given these points, we can see how an accident of geography had given Europeans immunity to lethal diseases, and the American Aboriginals none at all at the time of contact. This, in large part, accounts for the Europeans' successful dominance over the American continents. It's important to note that this is only a summary of why the direction of disease was primarily one-way, but one that hits on some very important points.

It is critical to balance this technical description with a first hand account, and tie the effect to the history of British Columbia. The excerpt from The narrative of Samuel Hancock (a settler in the Pacific North West in the 19th century) can be read, in part or in whole, to give students a first-hand historical perspective. (see resource page below for excerpt, or link to entire entry)

Assessment: 30 mins

Students will be assessed based on the results of their worksheet matched against the rubric. Alternatively, students could use the “Web of effects” worksheet reproduced from the book *Teaching about historical thinking*. (p. 87) In this case, domestication of herd animals would be at the center of the web.

Worksheet: Social Studies 10

Name:

Arrange the following events in the correct sequence:

- 1) Students will place events into the flow chart, and identify the causes that lead to the various effects.
- 2) Europeans arrive in the Americas bearing epidemic diseases
- 3) European and Asian populations are decimated by epidemics, but slowly gain resistance over the centuries
- 4) Aboriginal populations in the Pacific North West are devastated by disease, making it easier for Europeans to exert their influence
- 5) Human population increases due to agriculture. Animals are domesticated.
- 6) Epidemic diseases first appear

Imagine Canada is invaded by aliens (yes, aliens). The aliens bring horrible disease, and have powerful weapons. List five friends or family members. Three of these people must be lost to disease or fighting. The invaders offer peace, but you must agree to give up speaking your language, and speak theirs. You must agree to wear strange clothes and adopt their strange beliefs, and work hard for them.

With a partner, discuss how you would respond to this offer. Would you choose to fight a hopeless battle? Or would you accept the peace? Do you agree with how members of BC's First Nations fought at say, the Chilcotin pass in 1864? Write your decision here in a short paragraph, with a clear statement on your position, and an explanation of why you chose this.

Rubric

All answers correct	Four answers correct	Two answers correct	No answers correct
8	6	4	0

Paragraph written in full sentences with clear position. **2**

Resources pages:

Excerpt from *Narrative of Samuel Hancock*

It was truly shocking to witness the ravages of this disease here at Neaah Bay. The natives after a time became so much alarmed that when any of their friends were attacked, all of the other occupants who lived in the house would at once leave it and the sick person with a piece of dried salmon and some water, laying all their personal effects by the sick persons, not intending to ever approach them again; sometimes the retreating ones would lie down anywhere on the beach till they died. I have, in walking along, encountered them lying in this situation when they would beg in the most supplicating manner for medicine or something to relieve them, promising to serve me as slaves all their lives should they recover, if I would contribute in some way to their recovery, while I did not have it in my power to do anything to ameliorate the sufferings of the poor creatures other than by furnishing them food or water if needed

...

In a few weeks from the introduction of the disease, hundreds of the natives became victims to it, the beach for a distance of eight miles was literally strewn with the dead bodies of these people, presenting a most disgusting spectacle. Eventually they abandoned the idea of remaining away from this dreadful enemy and in their distress concluded I might afford them some relief, and as soon as they would feel the symptoms of the disease, they would come about my house and lie down in the yard to die. They continued this until the dead were so numerous I could scarcely walk about around my house, and was obliged to have holes dug where I deposited: fifteen or twenty bodies in each. Still they continued to come about me to die, in such numbers that I finally hauled them down to the beach at a time of low tide, so they would drift away, and even the dogs, during the prevalence of this pestilence, became fat on the bodies of their deceased masters.

from: <http://web.uvic.ca/~qxm/hancocksmallpoxonly.pdf>

Most information presented here can be found in:

Diamond, J. (1997). *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. (pp. 157-174 & 195-214) New York: W.W. Norton & Company

Interesting facts to support the lesson:

-Until the Second World War, most soldiers participating in wars died of disease rather than combat. (Diamond, 197)

-Highest number of people to die in a single epidemic outbreak: Influenza - 21 million in 1918 (Diamond, 202)

-One quarter of Europe's population was killed by Black Death (Bubonic Plague) between 1346-52 (70% in cities). (Diamond, 202)

-Estimates suggest that Eurasian disease killed 95% of all the indigenous peoples in the Western Hemisphere. (Diamond, 211)

-A good question: Why didn't North American Aboriginal peoples domesticate bison? Answer: Their temperaments were too nasty. From 1980 – 1999 in Yellowstone National Park, bison injured more park visitors than any other animal... including bears!

Caslick, J. T. Ollif. (2003). *Yellowstone Science. Wildlife-Human conflicts in Yellowstone*, 11, 18.
Retrieved from <http://www.nps.gov/yell/planyourvisit/upload/YS11%281%29.pdf>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:UBC_MOA_native_Indian_wood_statue_carving.jpg
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Lascaux_painting.jpg

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Smallpox_virus.jpg