



Indigenous Contributions to North America and the World

Indigenous people in North and South America lived freely until the arrival of European powers. The original European settlers relied on the generosity of Indigenous peoples for their survival and the Indigenous peoples were open to sharing. As colonialism took hold, the Europeans often lapsed into the appropriation and plagiarism of Indigenous knowledge resulting in many people being unaware of the vast contributions that Indigenous people have made to the world. Jack Weatherford reveals how the gifts of Indigenous peoples' improve the well-being of all peoples in his novel *Indian Givers: How the Indians of the Americas Transformed the World* and other sources. This information sheet summarizes some of the highlights of this important book exposing readers to the many ways Indigenous knowledge affects their lives.

Wealth

Prior to colonization, Indigenous peoples lived in prosperous societies with well-developed economic systems.¹ Poverty was rare as resources were managed for communal benefit. Post- colonization, European settlers began to extract resources from Indigenous lands, often with no permission, vanquishing some communities to profound poverty and even extinction. According to Jack Weatherford, Cerro Rico, which is located in the Andes near the Bolivian city of Potosi, was once a very prosperous silver mining mountain.² The Europeans extracted enough silver from the mountain that a silver bridge could have been built stretching from the mountains of Bolivia back to Spain.³ However, the Europeans were also looking for gold and they found it.⁴ Within a 150 year span, the Europeans extracted 180-200 tons of gold from the Americas.⁵ Much of Europe's wealth was derived from the wrongful taking of Indigenous property from the peoples of North and South America. Prior to the colonization of North and South

America, Europe had only \$2 million dollars' worth of gold and silver⁶ and after colonization it accumulated over two billion dollars' worth of silver and gold.⁷ This means that the wealth that we have in Canada today likely originated from the wealth of South America.

Food

The food that we eat in Western countries does not all stem from European roots, and roughly 60 percent of our everyday foods stem from American Indigenous diets. One of the biggest staple foods in the world today is the potato.⁸ The potato originates from North America where several different Indigenous groups farmed them.⁹ The Incas and the Peruvians in South America bred several different versatile types of potatoes for many different uses and the Andeans farmed nearly 3000 different types of potatoes at the time of discovery.¹⁰ Today, potatoes are eaten in a variety of forms. Without the Indigenous people, we would not have French fries or mashed potatoes as part of our diet. For Canadians, this would mean no poutine, a popular dish enjoyed by many. Another large part of the contemporary diet is the tomato. The tomato originated from the Americas before the Spanish took it back to Europe.¹¹ The Italians took hold of the tomato and began using it as sauces, creating the foods we now so frequently eat such as spaghetti, lasagna and other pasta dishes as well as the pizza, which are all such large staples to diets in Canada and around the world.¹² Even the idea of the barbecue was adopted from Indigenous practices, specifically from the island of Hispaniola located in the Caribbean.¹³ The Taino Indigenous group on the island created sauces that they would lather on the meat before cooking it over an outdoor fire, which was adapted by residents of the Southern United States and eventually made its way across America and into Canada.¹⁴ Many foods that we eat today are grilled in this manner such as

steak and ribs.¹⁵

According to National Geographic, Indigenous people of the Americas are also credited with some sweeter treats.¹⁶ Gum, chocolate and vanilla are all attributed to Indigenous people of the Americas.¹⁷ Many people indulge in chocolate and vanilla and they are present in many of our desserts from cookies to cakes. Indigenous people of Canada are responsible for the discovery of maple syrup¹⁸ which is used as a sweet topping on pancakes and an addition to baked beans.

The Europeans also learnt a lot about agriculture techniques to improve crop productivity from the Indigenous people.¹⁹ For example, early Americans bred their corn to form the husk around the outside to protect the corn from the weather.²⁰ Another example is how Indigenous people planted seeds, rather than scattering them in hopes of them taking root which proved to yield better crop production.²¹ It was Indigenous people who discovered the use of heated hydrocyanic acid as a meat preservative as well.²²

Medicine

Indigenous people of the Americas brought forward several natural treatment options for different sicknesses, many of which were adapted by the Europeans.²³ Quinine comes from the bark of trees and was specifically used to treat malaria.²⁴ Scientists later discovered it could also prevent the disease.²⁵ Another tree was able to cure amoebic dysentery – an intestinal infection.²⁶ The Indigenous people used the tree to induce vomiting, which expelled toxins.²⁷ It is still used today when people ingest poison and are taken to the hospital.²⁸ Indigenous people of North America also provided the Europeans with a cure for scurvy.²⁹ The medicine was a combination of bark and pine needles from an evergreen tree.³⁰ The medicine also contained a large dose of Vitamin C which cured many sick men.³¹ Other medicinal discoveries by Indigenous people include: fever reducers, cures for headaches, pain killers for child birth and muscle soothing medicines.³² Many of these medicines still have use in contemporary times. In terms of medical technology, the Aztec people created incredibly sophisticated medical tools, notably their scalpels which

have been replicated and have been used in current medical practice.³³

Dental Care is attributed to Indigenous people of the Americas as well.³⁴ In North America, sticks were used to brush teeth while in the Aztec world, salt and charcoal were used to clean their teeth.³⁵ Naturally dental hygiene is still an important part of daily life for many people around the world and had its beginnings in Indigenous America.

Conclusion

Everyday, we utilize items and eat food that comes from Indigenous knowledge and inventions. Without the contribution of the Indigenous people, we would be without much of the wealth that was discovered in the Americas. We would be with a much different government system and we would not be eating all of the foods that we are now. We would also be lacking some of the advancements in medicine that were brought by Indigenous people, including dental care, medical tools and cures for diseases such as scurvy. The contributions mentioned throughout this information sheet are present in our daily lives and we should be thankful to Indigenous people of the Americas.

Information sheet prepared by: Jessica Lemke

¹ Indian Givers: How the Indians of the Americas Transformed the World, 1988.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ 16 Indian Innovations: From Popcorn to Parkas. (2004, September 21). Retrieved December 1, 2015, from http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2004/09/0914_040913_information_about_indians_2.html



¹⁸ Indian Givers: How the Indians of the Americas Transformed the World, 1988.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ 16 Indian Innovations: From Popcorn to Parkas. (2004, September 21). Retrieved December 1, 2015, from http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2004/09/0914_040913_information_about_indians_2.html

³⁵ Ibid.