

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom {Proverbs 9:10}

A Contemplation of American Indian Population In Relation To American Continent Size

Consider:

How much of North America (the lower 48 States) did or could the American Indians actually occupy?

In researching this topic I found that population estimates varied greatly as to how many Indians existed before North America was discovered and inhabited by white men from Europe. The estimates range from 1,000,000 to 10,000,000 in any given year. What most scholars seem to agree on is that by 1800, the numbers significantly decreased down to about 600,000.

In North America's history we have identified 574 native American tribal cultures of Indians, 229 of which occupied Alaska. Think about that. Nearly 40% of the North American Indian Tribes resided in Alaska. Scholars believe that the total population of Indians living in Alaska was likely much smaller due to the extreme living conditions. So to give the greatest benefit of our calculations to the Indian population - we will make an allowance for 400,000 living in Alaska and 9,600,000 living in the lower 48 States.

A particular Indian Tribe, like the Pueblo Indians, may have an overall population of 40,000 to 60,000, but often resided in small encampments/villages/groups ranging from 100 to 1,000. Historians record that the Pueblo Indians in their heyday had approximately 800-1,000 villages which suggests that the population was between 300 and 600 per village. This is something to keep in mind as we go along.

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Lower 48 States - 2,959,064 sq miles

Alaska - 665,384 sq miles (20% of lower 48 States land mass)

California - 163,696 sq miles (5.3% of lower 48 States land mass)

Montana- 147,040 sq miles (5% of lower 48 States landmass)

So let's just take a birds eye view here with a couple facts. Today, our most populated state is California with 39,000,000 + people. Montana has a land mass slightly smaller than California at 147,040 sq miles and a population of 1,137,000. California is known for its big cities and skyscrapers while Montana is known for its vast wooded and mountainous territories. This gives the immediate visual that in relation to the size of the lower 48 States, the footprint of 9,600,000. Native American Indians were remarkably small in comparison to the landmass of the lower 48 states. But is that backed by factual data? Let's see.

Average Native American Indian tribes/groups/villages were grouped between 300-800 people. These tribes/groups could be numerous and be part of a Nation of tribes like the Comanche or Pueblo Nation in the tens of thousands, but history tells us they were greatly spread out and there was not one governing body. They were simply people of the same tribes cultural makeup and identity. That being said, what territory would a single tribe/village of 300-800 occupy? What size would be reasonable to sustain that number and also defend? 5 sq miles? 10? 20? 100?

While we must be cognizant of the fact that European ideas of land acquisition and usage differ greatly from that of the Indians, the fact remains that territories were still claimed and defended. Skirmishes between Indian groups were primarily because of incursions upon one another's territory and outright territory acquisition. So our examination of land footprint of indigenous people groups necessarily needs to balance "need" from "wants" with regard to the expanse of group territory necessary. This plays into the migratory nature of some tribes in that the possession of the territory was temporary yet still considered their territory and defended while encamped.

So, when considering what type of land footprint would be needed to sustain a group of 300 to 800 people, a couple factors come into play. For hunter gatherers - hunting needs. Quantity of wildlife. For more agricultural cultures - planting lands / soils and length of seasons keeping in mind that agricultural Indian tribes still hunted wildlife for food..

Let's consider the availability of wildlife. Some contend that hundreds if not thousands of sq miles were needed for sustainable hunting. This idea is really at great odds with basic facts. First, water was a primary resource and therefore Indian groups would make settlements near water sources. This, in and of itself, provides for much sustainable protein through fishing. Second, I contend that there was an abundance of wildlife available and there was not a need for a vast territory to hunt. Consider for a moment that the estimated bison population in the lower 48 states pre-1600's was between 30,000,000 and 60,000,000. While it is acknowledged that the bison were not readily available to all Indian groups, the point is, If the bison population was that large (prolific), consider what the population of deer, elk, and moose were (saying nothing about rabbits, squirrel, fox, bobcat etc..). Additionally, conservative estimates today are that there are 10 billion birds in the lower 48 states which surges to 20 billion in the spring. So, yearly sustainability of available wildlife does NOT seem to pose a significant barrier to food supply needs.

When considering things through a primarily practical lens , and with groups and conditions being so varied, I asked Grok Ai to compute an average (not minimum) amount of acreage needed for sustenance for one Native American Indian in the 1500 and 1600s. Taking into account agricultural and hunter-gatherer Indian cultures as well as varying regions' landscapes, it concluded: "For a broad average, **15–25 acres per person** is a defensible figure, balancing the prevalence of agriculture in populous regions with the vast territories of hunter-gatherers. This assumes a sustainable diet and basic resources (food, wood, water) without modern tools or trade disruptions introduced later in the 1600s." (*197 acres/person is the upper limit as it would encompass every sq mile of the lower 48 States)

Then for a group of 300-800 Indians, per our calculations, that would mean a sustainable territory would be approximately 12 - 31 sq miles respectfully.

So with some confidence and using the higher end (25 acres) to charitably favor the Indian side of the calculation, we come up with 240,000,000 acres needed to sustain a population of 9,600,000 Native American Indians in the lower 48 States. There are 640 acres in 1 sq mile. Therefore we have a minimum need of 375,000 sq miles required to comfortably sustain the lower 48 states population of Native American Indians in the 1500 and 1600s at peak population levels. That's a little larger than the size of California and Montana combined.

(Please keep in mind that I chose for my calculations the highest population estimates. Imagine if the number were more conservative?)

375,000 sq miles is 13% of the total lower 48 states land mass. (If we charitably doubled that it would still be less than 30% of the total lower 48 States land mass)

Does this square with available information we have on Indigenous peoples populations and territory sizes?

Let's look at the Pueblo Indians. Historians record that the pre 1600's Pueblo Indians population was estimated at 40,000 to 60,000 with approx 800 to 1,000 villages/groups spanning a territory of 20,000 to 30,000 miles. The Pueblo Indians were amongst the largest of Indian tribes at the time. Given some of the Pueblo habitat construction, groups could be anywhere from a few hundred to a thousand or more. Scholars seem to agree that 300-800 is a reasonable average to consider.

Here's what we find (again, using the larger numbers to charitably favor the Indian side of the calculation): 60,000 people needing 25 acres/person for sustainability equals 1,500,000 acres. There are 640 acres in 1 sq mile. $1,500,000 / 640 = 2,344$ sq miles on average needed to sustain a population of 60,000 Indigenous peoples. Yet, historians record a claimed territory of 20,000 to 30,000 sq miles.

If the territory of the Pueblo Indians is considered a defacto example of actual needs for sustainability for that population size, we have a major problem. Why? Because 30,000 sq miles of needed territory for sustainability works out to be approximately 320 acres per person for sustainability.

The math:

30,000 sq miles = 19,200,000 acres

19,200,000 acres / 60,000 people = 320 acres per person

*On the lowest population of 40,000 that's 480 acres/person

On its face - those numbers are ridiculous! Why? Extrapolating that out to the 9,600,000 lower 48 State Indigenous population we started with and we get a need of 4,800,000 sq miles of land (9,6000,000 * 320 acres then divided by 640) needed to sustain a population of 9,600,000 indigenous Indians in the lower 48 states. The landmass of the lower 48 states is only 2,959,064 sq miles!! (*Remember the upper limit acreage/person was calculated at 197 acres to encompass all of the lower 48 States land mass.)

Grok Ai seems to have presented a very logical, common sense estimate giving adequate deference to a plus or minus given different land conditions as well as culture types.

So there is a major discrepancy with regard to the reasonably calculated needed territory space compared to the historical recorded territory occupancy of some Indian Tribes such as the Pueblo Indian example. For certain, we cannot make the leap to assert that historically recorded tribal territories sizes represent on whole - numbers **required** for sustainability.

Additionally, I believe the facts point to a realization that while Indigenous North American Indians probably traversed the length, breadth and depth of the lower 48 States land mass during migratory seasons and times, the actual footprint of occupied territories at any given point in time was remarkably low. I believe charitably we could say under 30% of the lower 48 states land mass was occupied or claimed as territory by Indigenous tribes/villages/groups at any one given point in time.

Historians genuinely agree that the North American Indigenous Indian population suffered a vast (80+%) depopulation due to the *inadvertent* introduction of European diseases to the indigenous population upon initial contact such as smallpox, measles, influenza, cholera, typhus and whooping cough. Oftentimes, the indigenous populations that suffered massive deaths never met the European white men at all, as the disease was passed along to them by their own people returning from trade. Without at least 20 century knowledge of diseases and disease transmission, it seems any contact between the Indigenous people and the European peoples was destined for tragedy.

If the mere coming together of the Indigenous population and the European people caused a decrease in population of the indigenous people by 80% - then our number goes from 9,600,000 to roughly 1,920,000 Indigenous people in the lower 48 States. If the pre 1600 population charitably had a footprint of less than 30% of the lower 48 states with regard to territory, that footprint dramatically decreased upon first contact with disease deaths being the major cause, not violence.

Let's just ponder this new number and contrast the Pueblo population to the Mayan Indians population. Historians record that the Mayan Indian population of Central America was approximately 2 million (33 x greater than the Pueblos) and lay claim to a territory of approximately 125,000 square miles while the Pueblo population was at max 60,000 with a territory of 30,000 sq miles. It seems clear historically reported Indian territory sizes went well beyond basic "need" or estimates were vastly overestimated. I leave the reader to consider reasons for this.

By 1800 the indigenous population was down to an estimated 600,000 Indigenous Indians in the lower 48 States.

In summary:

I believe the facts discussed back up the initial hypothesis that the reasonable Indigenous Indian occupation footprint on the lower 48 states at any given point in time prior to 1600's was very low. 2-3

states would have been a more than sufficient occupation footprint for 9,600,000 Indigenous Indians. Their influence certainly encompassed the breadth and depth of the lower 48 States. But there is a vast difference between influence upon a land and a reasonable claim to possession of a territory.

These facts, along with other facts, help us to more accurately assess the colonization of North America from the 1600's through the 1800's. If we're honest with history, for centuries the Indians fought and seized land back and forth amongst themselves. So this introduction of territory takeover by opportunity and might was already in play between the tribal peoples themselves long before the white man showed up. This complicates any assertion of inviolable sovereignty as well as any righteous indignation, internal or external, for a violation thereof. And let me be equally clear. I am not insinuating in any way shape or form that the white European colonization did not exact violence upon the indigenous population. They certainly did. Horribly so in many cases. We simply must acknowledge that there were no "clean hands" in this.

I raise all these points in an effort to reconcile a long touted accusation: **This land was stolen from the Indians.** Honestly, I struggle. It's certainly not black and white. In some cases, I conclude - yes. But then again with about 90% of the lower 48 states unoccupied or at least lacking any logical or common sense claim to it, I conclude - no.

In the end, two wrongs don't make a right...but let's just be a little more honest about the events and facts when we formulate our narrative.

Additional info:

Today the federal reservations cover 87,800 sq. miles and the Native American Trust lands cover an additional 85,937 sq miles for a total of 173,737 sq miles of protected Indian land.

The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that 7.4 million people identified as American Indian or Alaska Native alone or in combination with other race groups in 2023. About 3.3 million people identified as American Indian or Alaska Native alone, accounting for 1.3% of all people living in the United States.