



A Pest in the Land: New World Epidemics in a Global Perspective (Diálogos Series)

By Suzanne Austin Alchon

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This study of disease among the native peoples of the New World before and after 1492 challenges many widely held notions about encounters between European and native peoples. Whereas many late twentieth century scholars blamed the catastrophic decline of postconquest native populations on the introduction of previously unknown infections from the Old World, Alchon argues that the experiences of native peoples in the New World closely resembled those of other human populations. Exposure to lethal new infections resulted in rates of morbidity and mortality among native Americans comparable to those found among Old World populations.

Why then did native American populations decline by 75 to 90 percent in the century following contact with Europeans? Why did these populations fail to recover, in contrast to those of Africa, Asia, and Europe? Alchon points to the practices of European colonialism. Warfare and slavery increased mortality, and forced migrations undermined social, political, and economic institutions.

This timely study effectively overturns the notion of New World exceptionalism. By showing that native Americans were not uniquely affected by European diseases, Alchon also undercuts the stereotypical notion of the Americas as a new Eden, free of disease and violence until the intrusion of germ-laden, rapacious Europeans.

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- Sales Rank: #1674586 in Books
- Brand: Brand: University of New Mexico Press
- Published on: 2003-03
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.00" h x .60" w x 6.10" l, .78 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 224 pages

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Review

"There is much to recommend in this book. The author's synthetic and wide-ranging approach is a helpful and welcome addition to the ongoing discussion of this important topic. . . . It would serve as excellent adjunct reading in an undergraduate course on American historical geography."

From the Publisher

In this timely study of all the reasons for extreme declines in native populations in the New World after colonization by Europeans, the author questions prevalent theories that exposure to Old World diseases was the sole cause of the devastation.

From the Inside Flap

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