



Columbian Exchange

The Columbian Exchange is the exchange of diseases, foods, animals, and humans between the New World (the Americas) and the Old World (Europe, Africa, and Asia) following the discovery by Christopher Columbus of the Americas in 1492. Although the demographic effect on the native Indian populations of the Americas was horrific, the world population started a dramatic increase from 1500 AD onward—an increase that has continued to this day—largely, as a result of the widespread transfers of plants and animals that took place in the Columbian Exchange.

Old World crops transported to the New World: wheat, rice, sugar
 Old World animals transported to the New World: horses, cows, pigs
 Old World diseases transported to the New World: smallpox, measles, influenza
 New World crops transported to the Old World: corn, potatoes, beans, squash

These crops and animals were taken to new continents, and provided much food for their new communities. As a result, the world population tripled from 1500 to 1900 (from 500 million to 1.5 billion). In fact, some of these crops were produced more in their new locations than in their old ones. In recent years, three of the top seven producers of wheat (an old world crop) were new nations formed after this Columbian Exchange (the United States, Australia, and Canada); and in the same way, four of the top five producers of beef are new nations (the US, Brazil, Argentina, and Australia). Six of the top 10 producers of corn (a New World crop) were Old World nations: China, Indonesia, India, France, South Africa, and the Ukraine.

The most devastating effect of the Columbian exchange was that of the transference of germs from the Old World to the New. Microparasites that had never before been in contact with the native Indian populations devastated them: smallpox, chicken pox, malaria, measles, and the flu (influenza). Upwards of 80% of the native Indian population was killed off in the 1500s and 1600s. Syphilis is the only major instance of a New World disease being spread throughout the Old World.