



K-12 Curriculum Project Teacher Resource Guide

The “Pristine Myth” and Its Influence Today

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Presentation Summary:

Many of us learn or come to believe that “New World” environments were pristine, mostly untouched wilderness when European colonizers arrived to the continent—especially in the Amazon rainforest. This belief is known as the “pristine myth” and we now know it to be untrue. Yet, the power of the “pristine myth” persists in the present, shaping ideas about nature and society today. In this talk I explain the myth and how it came to be, share some of the evidence that disproves the myth, and discuss why it can be problematic for people and nature.

Targeted Grades: Middle School (6-8)/High School (9-12)

Wyoming Social Studies Standards Lesson Aligns With:

- **SS8.4.1** Describe how historical events impact the future (cause and effect) and how change spreads to other places (e.g., spread of industrial revolution or causes of the Civil War, impacts of Manifest Destiny, aftermath of French and Indian War, and progression of Indian Removal Act).
- **SS8.4.4** Identify historical interactions between and among individuals, groups, and/or institutions (e.g., family, neighborhood, political, economic, religious, social, cultural, and workplace).
- **SS8.5.2** Analyze and evaluate how physical features and changes influenced historical events (e.g., route of Union Pacific Railroad, location of Wind River Indian Reservation, state and national monuments and parks) and participate in collaborative problem solving and decision-making in the selection of professional and personal choices.
- **SS8.5.4** Analyze the changes to and consequences of human, natural, and technological impacts on the physical environment.
- **SS12.4.1** Describe patterns of change (cause and effect) and evaluate how past events impacted future events and the modern world.
- **SS12.4.4** Describe the historical interactions between and among individuals, groups, and/or institutions (e.g., family, neighborhood, political, economic, religious, social, cultural, and workplace) and their impact on significant historical events.
- **SS12.5.2.a** Analyze how the value placed on physical characteristics and natural resources cause conflict among different groups.
- **SS12.5.3** Analyze, interpret, and evaluate how conflict, demographics, movement, trade, transportation, communication, and technology affect humans’ sense of place.
- **SS12.5.4** Analyze how environmental changes and modifications positively and negatively affect communities, tribes and the world both economically and socially.

Suggested Discussion Questions/Activities:

1. What is the “Pristine Myth” and what major global event led to its development?
2. Does the evidence that the Amazon was planted, burned, built, and domesticated match with your idea about native peoples of the Amazon before contact with Europe? Why or why not?
3. What are some ways that the “Pristine Myth” might have legitimized European conquest of the new world?
4. How does the “Pristine Myth” relate to the concept of “Manifest Destiny” and the settling (or colonization) of North America/United States and Wyoming?
5. How does the “Pristine Myth” influence environmental and conservation thought and practice today? Do you have any examples you’ve experienced in your own life?
6. What are some negative impacts for nature and people of the persistence of the “Pristine Myth” in environmental thought today?
7. How does the logic of the “Pristine Myth” fit (or not) with how our national park and wilderness areas are used? How does it relate to our policies such as the “multiple use” of our national forest, grasslands, etc., and how they can and cannot be used by people?

Sources for Additional Information on the Topic:

Suggested Reading

- *Myth of pristine Amazon rainforest busted as old cities reappear*. By Fred Pearce. *New Scientist*, July 2015. <https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn27945-myth-of-pristine-amazon-rainforest-busted-as-old-cities-reappear/#ixzz6dWac2zaL>
- *The domestication of Amazonia before European conquest*. By Charles R. Clement, William M. Denevan, Michael J. Heckenberger, André Braga Junqueira, Eduardo G. Neves, Wenceslau G. Teixeira and William I. Woods. *Proceedings of the Royal Society B*, August 2015. <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rspb.2015.0813>
- *The Pristine Myth: The Landscape of the Americas in 1492*. By William M. Deneven, In *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, Callicott, J.B, and Nelson, M.P. (eds), p. 414-442 Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1992.
- The Pristine Myth: Charles C. Mann, the author of "1491," talks about the thriving and sophisticated Indian landscape of the pre-Columbus Americas. Interview between Charles Mann and Katie Bacon, *The Atlantic*, March 2002. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2002/03/the-pristine-myth/303062/>

Video Resources

- Terra Preta—Amazon (BBC): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-YS8I6AZRfg>
- The Secret of El Dorado (BBC): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oOs-ujelkgw&index>

Contacting the Wallop Team:

For information on how to schedule a chat-back “Ask Me Anything” session with Zoe Pearson or for more information on this or other modules contact the Wallop Program Team at wallop@uwyo.edu.