

Blessings and curses: the introduction of horses to plains indians



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This paper will trace the social, ecological, economic, and political changes that took place in many Indian cultures when the horse was introduced to North America. The introduction of this Old World beast in the 1700's opened up opportunities for trade, raiding, and war for Plains Indian tribes but it also upset the balance of their traditional ways. A common portrayal of Plains Indian horse cultures is that it was a straight-forward success story with little to no drawbacks. I will analyze this commonly accepted conception and challenge it by stating that there were several negative aspects along with the limited positive aspects which makes the effect of horses more negative than simply beneficial or neutral. This paper seeks to show that the domestication and heavy use of horses ultimately led to the downfall of the Plains Indians, as they were too divided and weak to resist takeover by whites from the east. A common theme of this paper is a new or improved method that the horse provided for Plains Indians as well as the unintended downside. The use of horses by Native Americans in the American plains had many short-term benefits that were ultimately outweighed by their long-term drawbacks.

To start, a common misconception about horses in Plains Indians culture needs to be refuted. This is the misconception that Plains Indians needed horses and that their economy relied upon them. The Querecho Indians were horseless in 1541 proving that horses were dispensable to their economy.

[1]A distinction needs to be made between the traditional view and the correct view regarding the impact that horses had on Plains Indians economy. The horse did not create Plains economy, but simply intensified it.

[2]Indians made great use of horses upon their reception from the Spanish. “

They ride extremely well, and make great use of the whip and the heel.”[3]This account of Plains Indians horse culture recorded in 1819 shows how adept they became with horses after only a few centuries of them being introduced.

Plains Indians had a great deal more success hunting bison with horses. The horse greatly expanded Native American hunting ranges while at the same time saved Native Americans both time and precious energy. A trip to a bison herd which was days away when traveling by foot, now took just a fraction of the time and resulted in a more fruitful hunt. Lewis and Clark describe many of the Plains tribes in their journals as being heavily reliant on horses for hunting any type of large animal. “ Those people hunt most commonly on horse back seround the Deer or Goat which they find in the open plains & kill them with their arrows, tho’ they sometimes hunt the deer on foot & decoy them.”[4]Because they were able to travel greater distances, neighboring tribes crossed paths more frequently while hunting for bison. Competition for this precious food source could divide even the most allied neighboring tribes resulting in deadly horse raids where tribes would steal horses from each other. Intensive bison herding and trade, which was made possible by the horse, entangled Plains Indians in almost constant raiding warfare with neighboring tribes.[5]Tribes who had previously waged war against each other experienced few casualties. However, after horses and guns arrived casualties increased, war parties became smaller, war chiefs disappeared, and the element of surprise often determined the outcome of a raid or battle.[6]

These warring factions put immense pressure on bison. The intense rivalry between neighboring tribes did not have the effect of creating buffer zones or neutral lands where game animals such as bison could find respite from human predation.[7] Here the use of horses indirectly led to a decline in bison population. Plains Indians took advantage of the gift of horses but did not realize that it was a gift that was disrupting the fragile way of life they had cultivated for generations that relied predominantly on bison. The Spanish Conquistador, Coronado and his account in 1541 shows how reliant Plains Indians were on bison. (the Spanish called bison, cows) “ From what was learned of these Indians, all their human needs are supplied by these cows, for they are fed and clothed and shod from these.”[8] Beyond the indirect effect, horses also directly affected the number of bison in the plains. Large horse herds depleted grassland which bison relied exclusively on for food, while they also transmitted deadly bovine diseases like anthrax.[9] The Indians on the great plains, relying on bison for most of their food, were greatly affected when bison numbers dropped. Because they were weakened by a lack of bison, many tribes faced starvation and were unable to recover after disease epidemics brought to them by white men. For example, Comanche numbers fell from around 20, 000 in the 1820’s to under a quarter of that in the 1850’s.[10]

Beyond the role the horse played in shaping the territory and ecology of Native Americans, they also played a large role in shaping the social life of Native Americans. The horse caused Native American society to become a relatively rigid rank society where exchange and social relations of production would benefit a select few at the cost of the majority.[11] In plains

societies where there was once general equality between all people, the horse, and the potential personal advantages it provided, brought about selfishness and greed that caused plains society to be broken up into social classes. There were many divides in these classes which resulted in the loss of a tight-knit community. In societies in the northern plains, horses were not common because of tough, cold winters. Because of this, men with just a few horses had many more opportunities to gain status and wealth than men with no horses. Since horses were very scarce, and subsequently extremely valuable, even the smallest differences in their ownership would have far-reaching social repercussions.[12] Owners of horses had an above-average living standard because of the advantages that horses provided for them. They could hunt bison more effectively using horses than they could by other methods and if they desired, they could trade their valuable horses in exchange for goods.

Through the ownership of horses, Plains Indians gained not only material possessions, but their wealth meant that they could secure support in councils, gain status, and monopolize positions of leadership.[13] While this was good for individuals who were rich and owned horses, there was a gap that formed between rich and poor that resulted in the increasing marginalization of the poor. This class struggle that did not exist in Plains Indian societies before horses can be seen as almost a westernization of these Native Americans even before whites themselves westernized them. It was increasingly difficult for the poor to get out of their state because the elite dominated the horse-raiding industry by manipulating who spoils were distributed to so that men with weaker connections were left with no horses

most of the time.[14]The rich also made it very hard for the poor to escape poverty as they would rig the production system for their own advantage, taking almost all the profits from the poor hunters they lent their horses to. [15]

While horses positively affected Plains Indians, making nearly everything they did quicker and easier, as well as opening up trade opportunities, a rather large negative effect was the greed for horses. This greed led to a variety of horrors, specifically disputes over border lines and horse raiding campaigns. Native Americans faced change by having to deal with how damaging warfare over border disputes was, including the high casualty rates that were a result of horse raiding. It has been estimated that women made up around 70 percent of the population of many norther plains societies, which shows just how deadly the raiding that accompanied Native American horse culture had become since it was men that went on raids.

[16]Many tribes went from coexisting with relative peace to, within a few generations, living in a state of warring with and raiding their neighbors for spoils.

Decades of starvation, disease, and especially warfare resulted in a very swift takeover of horse-reliant tribes in the plains by Americans and Europeans. By 1877, after only a few skirmishes with the U. S. Army, the majority of Plains Indians tribes were wiped out or confined to reservations.

[17]A treaty between the United States and several plains tribes in 1867 shows how weak these tribes had become since "...they pledge themselves to make no permanent settlement at any place, nor on any lands, outside of said reservation." [18]After a few short centuries that began with the <https://assignbuster.com/blessings-and-curses-the-introduction-of-horses-to-plains-indians/>

seeming promise of a future of wealth and opportunity, the many contradictions of domesticating and relying on these non-native beasts proved too great for Native Americans in the plains.

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[1]Robert Lowie, *Reflections on the Plains Indians* , (1955), 67.

[2]Lowie, *Reflections* , 69.

[3]Edwin James, *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains, Performed in the Years 1819, 1820 [volume 2]*, (London, 1823), 12.

[4]Reuben Thwaites, *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1804-1806* , (New York, 1905), 40.

[5]Pekka Hamalainen, *The Rise and Fall of Plains Indian Horse Cultures*, (2003), 843.

[6]Harold Driver, *Comparative Studies of North American Indians* , (1957), 379.

[7]Hamalainen, *The Rise and Fall* , 852.

[8]George Parker Winship, translator, *The Journey of Coronado* , (New York, 1904), pp. 65f., 193ff., 210f.

[9]Hamalainen, *The Rise and Fall* , 844.

[10]Ibid. 844.

[11]Ibid. 851.

[12]Ibid. 849.

[13]Ibid. 849.

[14]Ibid. 850.

[15]Ibid. 849.

[16]Ibid. 852.

[17]Ibid. 853.

[18]Yale Law School, *Treaty With the Kiowa, Comanche, and Apache; October 21, 1867* , (Washington, DC, 1904), Article 1.