Estimate of Western Indians

By Lewis & Clark Journals. Thwaites. 1906. V6: 113-120

Charged by Thomas Jefferson with recording the names of Native communities and estimating the size of their populations, Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark dutifully took note of the number of inhabitants in each of the Native settlements they passed on their way to the Pacific.

Lewis and Clark compiled these numbers during their long stay at Fort Clatsop into what scholars call the Codex 1 version of the Estimate of Western Indians. This version was later modified and published in the 1905 Thwaites edition of the Lewis and Clark journals, reproduced here.

The two versions of the estimate—the Codex 1 version and the published version—differ widely in their estimates of the Indian population west of the Rocky Mountains. In the Codex 1 version, for example, Lewis and Clark estimate that 9,140 Native people lived along the Columbia River from Celilo Falls downstream to the Pacific Ocean, including the large communities on Sauvie Island. In the published version shown here, however, the number given for the same area is 14,890, significantly larger than the Codex 1 version.

Anthropologists Robert Boyd and Yvonne Hajda argue that the Codex 1 estimate represents the winter population on the Columbia, while the published version represents the spring population. When the Expedition made its way back up the Columbia in April 1806, river villages would have been swelled by inland visitors partaking in the spring salmon runs, warmly welcomed by people who had lived for months on dried foods.

While the Columbia River region was rich in natural resources, these resources were not present in all places at all times. Plant and animal foods were only available during certain times of the year, and Native peoples adjusted their seasonal schedule accordingly, following the resources as they became available. This seasonal movement, Boyd and Hajda argue, explains the divergent numbers found in the two versions of the estimate.


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