

## Colonialism did not just create slavery: it changed geology

**Notes & Cues:****Article:**

Colonialism didn't just produce slavery and cigarettes, it changed the geological composition of our planet. This is the view of two UK scientists who believe the impact of colonialism was so profound it can be detected in Earth's air and rocks, an idea revealed in *The Human Planet: How We Created the Anthropocene*, by Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin.

"The arrival of Europeans, in particular the British and Spanish, had a profound impact on central and southern America," Maslin told the Observer. "They carried germs for smallpox, measles, flu, typhoid and many other diseases that led to the deaths of more than 50 million Americans." Society in America collapsed and subsistence farming there was wiped out."

Forests returned to land that had been abandoned by humans. "We can detect this in Antarctic ice cores," added Maslin. "These provide a history of the atmosphere for thousands of years and show carbon dioxide levels reached a distinct minimum around 1610 because forests, which are much better than farm crops at absorbing carbon dioxide, were now covering vastly increased areas of the American landscape – thanks to the eradication of the people who had once farmed there." This effect continued for decades until America's population of humans was restored.

Just how the Anthropocene will change and affect our planet is less clear, they admit. "We have become a new force of nature, dictating what lives and what goes extinct. Although in one crucial respect we are unlike any other force of nature: our power, unlike plate tectonics or volcanic eruptions, is reflexive – it can be used, modified or even withdrawn."

**Summary:**