

Exemplar Informational Texts: History and Social Studies – The Americas of 1491

**Mann, Charles C. *Before Columbus: The Americas of 1491*. New York: Atheneum, 2009. (2009)
From Chapter 2**

If you asked modern scientists to name the world’s greatest achievements in genetic engineering, you might be surprised by one of their low-tech answers: maize.

Scientists know that maize, called “corn” in the United States, was created more than 6,000 years ago. Although exactly how this well-know plant was invented is still a mystery, they do know where it was invented—in the narrow “waist” of southern Mexico. This jumble of mountains, beaches, wet tropical forests, and dry plains is the most ecologically diverse part of Mesoamerica. Today it is the home of more than a dozen different Indian groups, but the human history of these hills and valleys stretches far into the past.

From Hunting to Gathering to Farming

About 11,500 years ago a group of Paleoindians was living in caves in what is now the Mexican state of Puebla. These people were hunters, but they did not bring down mastodons and mammoths. Those huge species were already extinct. Now and then they even feasted on giant turtles (which were probably a lot easier to catch than the fastmoving deer and rabbits.)

Over the next 2,000 years, though, game animals grew scarce. Maybe the people of the area had been too successful at hunting. Maybe, as the climate grew slowly hotter and drier, the grasslands where the animals lived shrank, and so the animal populations shrank, as well. Perhaps the situation was a combination of these two reasons. Whatever the explanation, hunters of Puebla and the neighboring state of Oaxaca turned to plants for more of their food.