...In describing New England’s natural abundance so enthusiastically, the colonists were misleading in two ways... Those [like Morton] who sought to promote colonial enterprises tended to put the best possible face on everything they encountered in the New World. Selective reporting, exaggeration, and outright lies could all be useful tools in accomplishing this task... When English immigrants exaggerated the [natural] wealth of New England, they dreamed of a world in which returns to human labor were far greater than in England.

Because their hopes led them to expect a land of plenty, early visitors introduced a second distortion into their accounts. Even when what they wrote was literally true, they often failed to note that it was not always true... Most early descriptions were written by spring and summer visitors, who naturally saw only the times when fish, fruit, and fowl were all too numerous to count. Would-be English settlers thus formed their vision of New England from accounts that concentrated the summer’s seasonal wealth into an image of perpetual abundance...

In New England, most colonists anticipated that they would be able to live much as they had done in England, in an artisanal and farming community with work rhythms, class relations, and a social order similar to the one they had left behind—the only difference being their own improved stature in society. There were many misconceptions involved in this vision, but the one most threatening to survival was the simple fact that establishing European relations of production in the New World was a far more complicated task than most colonists realized. Even to set up farms was a struggle... Many colonists arrived believing that they could survive until their first harvest simply by living as the Indians supposedly did, off the unplanted bounties of nature. Colonists were assured by some that Indian men got their livelihood with “small labour but great pleasure.”... The willingness of colonists to believe such arguments, and hazard their lives upon them, was testimony to how little they understood both the New England environment and the ways Indians actually lived in it.

A central fact of temperate ecosystems like those of New England is their periodicity: they are tied to overlapping cycles of light and dark, high and low tides, waxing and waning moons, and especially the long and short days which mean hot and cold seasons... Just as a fox’s summer diet of fruit and insects shifts to rodents and birds during the winter, so too did the New England Indians seek to obtain their food wherever it was seasonally most concentrated in the... ecosystem. Doing so required an intimate understanding of the habits and ecology of other species, and it was this knowledge that the English discovered they lacked.

Indian communities had learned to exploit the seasonal diversity of their environment by practicing mobility: their communities characteristically refused to stay put. The principal social and economic grouping for precolonial New England Indians was the village, a small settlement with perhaps a few hundred inhabitants... Villages, rather than the larger and better-known units called tribes or confederacies, were the centers around which Indian interactions with the environment revolved. But villages were not fixed geographical entities: their size and location changed on a seasonal basis, communities breaking up and reassembling as social and ecological needs required. Wherever villagers expected to find the greatest natural food supplies, there they went. When fish were spawning, many Indian families might gather at a single waterfall to create a dense temporary settlement in which feasting and celebration were the order of the day; when it was time to hunt in the fall, the same families might be found scattered over many square miles of land. All aspects of Indian life hinged on this mobility...

The seasonal cycles within which a village moved depended on the habitats available to it: Indians who had access to the seashore, for instance, could lead rather different lives than their inland counterparts. Important as habitat differences were, however, the crucial distinction between Indian communities was whether or not they had adopted agriculture... Because the ability to grow crops had drastic implications for the way a village conducted the rest of its food-gathering activities, it is best to begin our description of Indian subsistence strategies in the north, where Indians were entirely dependent on the natural abundance of the ecosystem. Only in the north [of New England] did Indians live entirely as hunter-gatherers...

Lifestyle of Northern New England Indians

In the north, spring commenced “when the leaves begin to sprout, when the wild geese appear, when the
fawns of moose attain to a certain size in the bellies of their mothers, and when the seals bear their young.” Most especially, the northern spring began when the ice broke up; then inland populations moved to coastal sites where they repaired fishing gear... in anticipation of the spawning runs. For Maine Indians who had access to the coast, probably well over half the yearly food supply came from the rivers and seashore... By early May, nonspawning fish were also providing food. Offshore were cod which had to be caught with hook and line. Closer to land were tidewater and ground fish... all of which could be caught with weirs and nets, and the larger sturgeon and salmon, which were usually harpooned. In the tidal zone were the scallops, clams, mussels, and crabs which women and children gathered as a steady base for the village diet...

The arrival of the alewives also heralded the coming of the migratory birds... Not only could women and children gather birds’ eggs while men fished; they could capture the birds themselves with snares or clubs. Bird migrations made their biggest contribution to Indian food supplies in April, May, September, and October, when Canada geese, brants, mourning doves, and miscellaneous ducks passed through... by July and August, strawberries, raspberries, and blueberries were ripe, providing food not only for Indians but for flocks of passenger pigeons and other birds which nested in the area. In addition to birds, various coastal mammals—whales, porpoises, walruses, and seals—were hunted and eaten. Nuts, berries, and other wild plants were gathered as they became available. In all ways, the summer was a time of plenty.

Things changed in September. Toward the middle of the month, Indian populations moved inland to the smaller creeks, where eels could be caught as they returned from their spawning in the sea. From October through March, villages broke into small family bands that subsisted on beaver, caribou, moose, deer, and bear. Men were responsible for killing these animals, while women maintained the campsite and did all the hauling and processing of the slaughtered meat... Northern Indians accepted as a matter of course that the months of February and March, when the animals they hunted were lean and relatively scarce, would be times of little food.

Europeans had trouble comprehending this Indian willingness to go hungry in the late winter months. They were struck by the northern Indians’ apparent refusal to store more than a small amount of the summer’s plenty for winter use... Here again was the paradox of want in a land of plenty. To a European sensibility, it made no sense to go hungry if one knew in advance that there would be little food in winter. Colonists who starved did so because they learned too late how ill informed they had been about the New World’s perpetual abundance... the colonists could not understand Indian attitudes toward winter food shortages. Consciously choosing hunger, rather than working harder in the leisurely times of summer, seemed a fool’s decision.

One effect of that choice, however, was to hold northern Indians to low population densities... the low Indian populations of the precolonial northern forests had relatively little impact on the ecosystems they inhabited. The very abundance which so impressed the Europeans was testimony to this fact. By keeping population densities low, the food scarcities of winter guaranteed the abundance of spring, and contributed to the overall stability of human relationships to the ecosystem.

**Lifestyle of Southern New England Indians**

The farming Indians of southern New England, among whom the earliest English colonists made their settlements, also engaged in hunting and gathering, but their ability to raise crops put them in a fundamentally different relationship with their environment. The very decision to engage in agriculture requires the creation of at least enough seed surplus to assure that planting can be done the following year, and opens the possibility of growing and storing enough food to carry a population through the winter with much less dependence on the vagaries of the hunt. Grain made up perhaps one-half to two-thirds of the southern New England diet, thereby reducing southern reliance on other foodstuffs; in comparison, northern Indians who raised no grain at all had to obtain two to three times more food energy from hunting and fishing. More importantly, nothing in the northern diet could be stored through the scarce times of winter as effectively as grain, making starvation a much less serious threat in the south than in the north.

The ability of agriculture to smooth out the seasonal scarcities of wild foodstuffs had major consequences of the sizes of Indian populations in New England. The nonagricultural Indians of Maine sustained population densities, on average, of perhaps 41 persons per hundred square miles. The crop-raising Indians of southern New England, on the other hand, probably maintained 287 persons on an identical amount of land, a sevenfold difference...

Although southern Indians engaged in many of the same annual hunting and fishing activities as northern ones, their concentration on the raising of crops can be seen even in the names they gave their months. Northern Indians named their lunar months in terms of
seasonal changes in animal populations, referring to the egg laying of birds, the running of salmon, the molting of geese, the hibernation of bears, and so on. By contrast, southern Indians chose the names of their months with an entirely different emphasis... the Agawam Indian village near Springfield, Massachusetts, began its year with the month of Squannikesos, which included part of April and early May, and whose name meant “when they set Indian corn.” This was followed by various months whose names indicated the weeding of corn, the hilling of corn, the ripening of corn, the coming of the frost, the middle of winter, the thawing of ice, and the catching of fish. The southern cycle of months was thus remarkable in having only a single reference to animals which so dominated the northern calendar, an indication of how much agriculture had transformed Indian lives there...

Southern Indians began their annual subsistence cycles by moving to their summer fields and preparing the grounds by working it with clamshell hoes... As the young plants grew, soil was raised around them to create low mounds which strengthened their roots against the attack of birds. Maize was not an easy crop to raise... Perhaps partly for this reason, Indian farmers, unlike European ones, used their cornfields to raise more than just corn. When [one European settler] observed Indian fields near the mouth of the Saco River, he noted that

With the corn they put in each hill three or four Brazilian beans [kidney beans], which are of different colors. When they grow up, they interlace with the corn, which reaches to the height of from five to six feet; and they keep the ground very free from weeds. We saw there many squashes, and pumpkins, and tobacco, which they likewise cultivate.

[Three sisters farming] was not an agriculture that looked very orderly to a European eye accustomed to monocultural fields. Corn stalks served as beanpoles, squashes sent their tendrils everywhere, and the entire surface of the field became a dense tangle of food plants... although Indians may or may not have realized it, the resulting harvest of beans and corn provided the amino acids necessary for a balanced diet of vegetable protein.

Except for tobacco, crops were primarily the responsibility of women... As with the hunting Indians of northern New England, the sexual division of labor for the agricultural peoples of southern New England was very well defined, women performing those jobs which were most compatible with simultaneous child-care. This meant tasks which were generally repetitive, which could be easily interrupted, which did not require travel too far from home, and which did not suffer if one performed them while giving most of one’s attention to the children. In the nonagricultural north, women’s work involved gathering shellfish and birds on the shore, collecting wild plants, trapping small rodents, making garments, keeping camp, and the whole range of food-processing activities; but meat gathered by men probably supplied half or more of a village’s food. In the south, on the other hand, agricultural changed this sexual division and made women much more important than men in providing food. A single Indian woman could raise anywhere from twenty-five to sixty bushels of corn by working an acre or two, enough to provide half or more of the annual caloric requirements for a family of five. When corn was combined with the other foods for which they were responsible, women may have contributed as much as three-fourths of a family’s total subsistence needs.

Crops were planted between March and late June... While women worked the fields, men erected weirs on the rivers and fished the spring spawning runs. By March, most beans and corn remaining from the previous harvest were probably needed as seed for planting, so that fish and migratory birds became the chief sources of food from late winter through midsummer...

Once crops were planted and weeded, they needed less attention for two or three months, until the ripening corn had to be guarded against marauding birds before being harvested... During these months, villages tended to disperse and families moved their individual wigwams to other planting and gathering sites. Women, who owned the wigwams and most household goods, moved their camps from field to field as necessary, and then to points along the coast where they gathered seafood and the cattails used in making mats for wigwams...

Men fanned out from these bases for extended fishing and hunting trips. They might disappear into the woods for ten days at a time to build a dugout canoe that would allow them to fish deep water with harpoon or hook and line... Whereas the relatively steady labor of agriculture and gathering allowed women to provide the largest share of a village’s food without moving far from home, the hunting and fishing of animal protein had much different requirements. These activities took men far from the main camp for many days at a time, and exposed them to much greater risk of injury or death. Hunting and fishing both had irregular work rhythms which sometimes required many intense hours of labor under hard conditions, and sometimes long hours of idleness. Times in camp were often periods of relative leisure and recuperation for men.

As summer drew to a close, female food production reached a climax and male hunting activities began to contribute a greater share of the village’s food. Autumn saw the harvesting of corn in addition to the gathering of
Northern Indians do not appear to have engaged in such burning. Because they did not practice agriculture and so were less tied to particular sites, they had less incentive to alter the environment of a given spot.

...Especially on old Indian fields, fire created conditions favorable to strawberries, blackberries, raspberries, and other gatherable foods... The soil became warmer and drier [in burned areas], discouraging tree species which preferred moister conditions—beech, sugar maple, red maple, black birch—and favoring drier species like oaks when regular burning was allowed to lapse. Burning also tended to destroy plant diseases and pests, not to mention the fleas... Indian burning promoted the increase of exactly those species whose abundance so impressed English colonists: elk, deer, beaver, hare, porcupine, turkey, quail, ruffed grouse, and so on. When these populations increased, so did the carnivorous eagles, hawks, lynxes, foxes, and wolves. In short, Indians who hunted game animals were not just taking the “unplanted bounties of nature,”; in an important sense, they were harvesting a foodstuff which they had consciously been instrumental in creating...

**Conclusion**

The ecological relationships which the English sought to reproduce in New England were no less cyclical than those of the Indians; they were only simpler and more concentrated. The English too had their seasons of want and plenty, and rapidly adjusted their false expectations of perpetual natural wealth to match New World realities. But whereas Indian villages moved from habitat to habitat to find maximum abundance through minimal work, and so reduce their impact on the land, the English believed in and required permanent settlements. Once a village was established, its improvements—cleared fields, pastures, buildings, fences, and so on—were regarded as more or less fixed features of the landscape. English fixity sought to replace Indian mobility; here was the central conflict in the ways Indians and colonists interacted with their environments. The struggle was over two ways of living and using the seasons of the year, and it expressed itself in how two peoples conceived of property, wealth, and boundaries on the landscape.