The Cost of Labor

Trace how the search for profits affected Taíno communities.

SS24.8.12a "Explain how the desire for cheap labor led to the enslavement and decline of the Indigenous populations in the Americas."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline why colonizers wanted labor at little or no cost and the two ways they forced Taíno people to provide it; circle three harms to Taíno communities that followed.

Gold, Sugar, and Forced Labor

1 When Spanish colonizers arrived on Hispaniola after 1492, they wanted gold and crops to sell across the Atlantic. Digging gold and growing sugarcane took many workers, but paying workers would reduce profits. Colonizers therefore sought labor they could obtain at little or no cost. They captured and enslaved some Taíno people, the Indigenous inhabitants of the island. Spanish authorities also assigned Taíno communities to colonizers under a system called encomienda. Colonizers demanded work or tribute from those communities, often through threats and force.

2 Imagine spending days digging in a mine instead of tending the field that feeds your family. Many Taíno workers faced exhausting labor, violence, and too little food. Forced work kept people from growing crops for their communities, while colonizers took food and resources for themselves. Enslavement and forced labor also separated families and disrupted village life. The demand for low-cost labor thus did more than take away freedom: it left many Indigenous people hungry, injured, and less able to care for one another.

3 Disease made this crisis far worse. Smallpox and other illnesses brought from Europe spread among Indigenous people whose communities had not encountered them before; many died. Hunger and harsh working conditions made survival harder, and violence killed others. As the Taíno population fell, colonizers faced a labor shortage but did not give up the search for cheap labor. They increasingly forced enslaved Africans to work on the island. The Taíno did not disappear: their descendants live today. Still, the drive for profit helped cause a devastating population decline.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. Why did colonizers seek labor at little or no cost, and how did that goal shape their treatment of Taíno people?

2. How did the encomienda system turn colonizers' need for cheap labor into forced work or tribute?

3. Explain two ways forced labor made survival harder for Taíno communities.

4. Why is it inaccurate to say disease alone caused the Taíno population decline?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a four-sentence museum label titled “The Cost of Cheap Labor.” Trace how the desire for profits led to forced labor and Taíno population decline, include the role of disease, and make clear that Taíno descendants still live today.

The Cost of Labor

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline why colonizers wanted labor at little or no cost and the two ways they forced Taíno people to provide it; circle three harms to Taíno communities that followed. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Why did colonizers seek labor at little or no cost, and how did that goal shape their treatment of Taíno people?	**Paying workers would reduce profits from gold and crops, so colonizers enslaved some Taíno people and forced others to provide work or tribute.**
2	How did the encomienda system turn colonizers' need for cheap labor into forced work or tribute?	**Spanish authorities assigned Taíno communities to colonizers, who demanded work or tribute, often using threats and force.**
3	Explain two ways forced labor made survival harder for Taíno communities.	**Forced work left less time to grow food, causing hunger. Exhausting labor and injuries also made survival harder.**
4	Why is it inaccurate to say disease alone caused the Taíno population decline?	**Disease killed many people, but forced labor, hunger, harsh working conditions, and violence also contributed to the decline.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

The Cost of Cheap Labor

Spanish colonizers wanted gold and sugarcane profits without paying many workers. They enslaved some Taíno people and forced others to work or give tribute, leaving less time to grow food. Hunger, violence, and harsh labor contributed to population decline, while diseases from Europe killed many more. Taíno descendants still live today, despite the suffering their ancestors endured.

Accept answers that connect the demand for low-cost labor to enslavement or forced work and explain its effects on survival. Students should recognize disease as an additional cause of decline, not the only cause.