

EXCERPT FROM THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
APPROVED STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE PROPOSED  
CAPTAIN JOHN SMITH CHESAPEAKE NATIONAL HISTORIC WATER TRAIL



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## **Historic Narrative - Section 5** **Powhatan and English Worldviews**

The worldviews of the Powhatan and the English could scarcely have been more dissimilar. The Powhatan people saw the land, the flora and fauna, the people, and those who might be called Tsenacomoco's spiritual inhabitants (especially gods and deceased ancestors) as a unified, inseparable entity, each aspect of which was equally "real." This worldview has sometimes been oversimplified into the principle that the native peoples were "one with nature," a concept that only skims the surface of their reality.

The English worldview held that human beings were a special creation separate from nature, which existed to be conquered and put into man's service. The spiritual realm was someplace else entirely, like nature distinct from the everyday life of human beings. The English polity was organized into a rigid hierarchy—the "great chain of being"—and had introduced itself into the "New World" to occupy, subdue, and exploit it. Authority flowed from God to the king to the nobles and to Parliament. Any break in the chain, any disorder in the body politic, led to chaos, treason, and civil madness, as the history and tragedy plays of William Shakespeare amply demonstrated. The superiority and essential rightness of English religious, social, and political life to all others was simply assumed. The Indians of America were considered human, but perhaps not as fully human as the English.

Collisions and misunderstandings between the newcomers and the Powhatan peoples were inevitable. This was particularly true because the English generally regarded the native people as ignorant and savage devil-worshippers living in a "state of nature"—childlike, untrustworthy, and dangerous. The English admitted that the natives had souls that might be saved through conversion to Christianity, as well as information about the country that might be useful and goods that were worth trading for or taking by force. In English eyes, however, they lacked sacred traditions worthy of respect, a social or political culture worth understanding, and an approach to living on the land worth adopting. That the country belonged to the Powhatan peoples and the English were uninvited "invaders" scarcely occurred to the newcomers. Some of the Englishmen who regularly interacted with the native peoples, however, developed a greater understanding of them than the stakeholders who remained in England.

Powhatan himself probably considered the Englishmen nuisances who might nonetheless prove helpful in countering hostile tribes and supplying useful trade goods, assuming that they survived or remained in his territory long enough to serve his purposes. The native peoples had seen other Europeans come and go, and Powhatan must have been puzzled as well as angered when this group began digging in without his permission on a swampy, unhealthy piece of land on the north side of the James River. Soon thereafter, they began to die like flies. When two of the English ships departed in June 1607, 104 men and boys remained in the colony; by the end of the winter, only 38 were left alive. Disease had killed most of them, and the survivors lived primarily because Powhatan fed them.

During that winter, Powhatan also had the opportunity to learn what the English were up to when a captured newcomer was brought before him at Werowocomoco. This prisoner, almost alone among the Englishmen, seemed to make an effort to comprehend the Powhatan view of the world. His name was John Smith.