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FORAGING

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BIG HISTORY PROJECT

FORAGING

LIFE AS A
HUNTER-GATHERER

By Cynthia Stokes Brown, adapted by Newsela

For 95 percent of our time on Earth, humans have survived by foraging. That is, we have hunted and gathered food from nature.



The Evolution of Foraging

Finding food is no problem for most humans today. We live with factory food, markets, and restaurants in nearly every town. Now imagine trying to find food every day in nature. Yet that is just what humans (*Homo sapiens*) have done for most of their time on Earth. We first appeared about 200,000 years ago. Yet, it wasn't until 11,000 years ago that we began to develop agriculture. And before *Homo sapiens* evolved, our hominine ancestors foraged for millions of years.

Foraging means relying on food found in nature. We gathered plants and small animals, birds, and insects. We picked up animals killed by other predators, and hunted. Foraging is often described as “hunting and gathering.”

Humans are not the only creatures who forage; many animals do too. What is different about human foraging? Answers vary. Yet, because humans could speak they began to gather knowledge. We passed it on to younger generations, and worked together. These skills helped humans become better foragers. It's what makes us different from other animals.

In fact, one could say that foraging made us human. As fruit trees in the rain forest became less common in the cooling, drying climate, the hominines who survived had to find other food sources. As they did, many traits evolved. We began walking on two feet, and lost most of our body hair. Our intestines became smaller and our brains got larger. And we became better communicators. These are the hallmarks of being human.

One of the most significant steps that hominines took was to control fire. They probably learned this by tending fires started by lightning. No one knows exactly when this occurred. Scientists believe hominines may have used fire to cook more than a million years ago.

Cooked food provided more nutrition. Most importantly, it contributed to brain development. Eating and chatting together around a fire may have helped languages develop. Those improvements in language led to greater awareness and collective learning.

Humans gradually developed their skill in hunting. At first, hominines probably scavenged meat killed by other animals. They'd find the body of an animal and drag it to a safe place. Then they'd butcher it with stone tools. As they developed better weapons and learned to hunt together, they were able to take down larger animals.

The economics of foraging

Climate and environment determine the lives of any group of humans. However, foragers share common characteristics. They must have possessed a detailed knowledge of their environment. They needed a large enough territory to move around in and forage.



Most foragers lived by moving frequently. They slept in temporary camps. When seasons changed, they followed animals as they migrated. Plants ripened at different times, so foragers moved to pick them. Foragers usually lived in small groups of 15 to 30. When food became scarce, or conflicts arose, they split up further.

Populations grew extremely slowly, if at all. Mother's milk provided the only food for infants. Because nursing lasted for three to four years, it often prevented a new pregnancy. In any case, mothers could not carry more than one infant at a time. In these close-knit groups, foragers usually shared food. Apparently, foraging societies were the fairest in human history.

The Bushmen of southern Africa

Until relatively recently, five different groups of people lived as foragers in the same place for 30,000 years. And it's a semidesert — the Kalahari Desert of Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa. The groups each have a name. But, together they are known as the Bushmen.

How did the Bushmen survive as foragers in a harsh desert for so long?

The Bushmen moved every day during the rainy season in search of greens to eat. They constructed simple shelters against the rain. During the dry season, however, they built more stable huts near water sources. Finding water was their main activity. Sometimes they dug deep holes when they found damp sand. They'd put hollow grass straws into the holes to sip water through. They might store water in ostrich eggshells for later.

The Bushmen had simple tools. Men used a bow with poison-tipped arrows and spears for hunting deer, antelope, and buffalo. For gathering, the women used a blanket, a sling made of hide, and a cloak to carry wood and food. They dug in the ground with sticks about three feet long.



Their diet was mostly nuts and roots. Women also collected fruit, berries, onions, and ostrich eggs. Grasshoppers, beetles, caterpillars, moths, butterflies, and termites gave Bushmen protein. Hunting was 20 percent of their total diet. Gathering provided the other 80 percent.

The Bushmen spent a large portion of their time at leisure — talking, joking, singing, and dancing. Decisions were reached as a group. Women were relatively equal with men.

As of the 1950s, Bushmen still lived in the traditional way. But, by the 1990s, most had been forced to adopt farming. Some of their former hunting grounds were turned into game preserves by African governments.

Debates about foraging

Foragers are studied by archaeologists and anthropologists. Archaeologists examine human societies through material, cultural, and environmental records. They study humans from the first tools up to recent decades. Anthropologists study societies today that still live much like pre-agricultural ones.

Both archaeology and anthropology come up with theories that are open to interpretation. Researchers draw conclusions about ancient foragers by studying modern foragers. Yet, comparing modern foragers to ancient ones is difficult. Modern foragers cannot completely escape the world around them. Today's foraging communities often use modern tools and technology. Much of their lands have been taken over.

Traditionally, archaeologists and anthropologists have thought that men did the hunting in foraging societies. Women did the gathering, they thought. However, recent studies challenge this view. People studying apes often point out that the females can provide for themselves. They don't need male assistance.



Among many current foraging societies, men and women are flexible about who hunts. In some cultures, hunting and gathering roles are even exchanged. By studying current foragers, scholars think ancient foragers were also flexible about roles.

Another ongoing debate among experts concerns the quality of life among foragers. Traditionally, foragers were viewed as having short, miserable lives, barely surviving. In the 1960s, fieldwork was done among surviving foragers — the Bushmen in Botswana, the Aborigines in Australia, and the Yanomami in Brazil. It revealed that foragers enjoy good nutrition obtained in a few hours a day. The rest of their day is spent socializing and grooming. But by the 1980s, this view was challenged.

A third debate concerns how much human foragers affected their environment. For a long time, it was assumed that early humans had little effect on nature. Experts thought that the arrival of agricultural societies led to environmental effects.

Since the 1960s, scientists have questioned this view. They pointed to two signs that foragers made a serious impact. For one thing, archaeologists have found evidence that foragers set fire to large areas. They may have done this to drive animals out for killing. Burning land also helps fresh plants grow. Such plants would provide food and attract animals.

In addition, whenever humans migrated into new areas, extinction followed. In North and South America, about 75 percent of the animals weighing more than 100 pounds went extinct within a couple of thousand years after humans arrived. These animals included mastodons, camels, horses, and saber-toothed tigers.

In Australia, humans are thought to have arrived about 40,000 to 60,000 years ago. Similar extinctions occurred there roughly 30,000 years ago. Giant kangaroos and marsupial lions completely died off. In Eurasia, the extinctions occurred more gradually and included mammoths, woolly rhinoceroses, and giant elk. The debate continues. Yet, it may be that a combination of changing climate, human hunting, and other changes brought about by humans may have done these large animals in.

Sources

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