FORAGING

LIFE AS A HUNTER-GATHERER

By Cynthia Stokes Brown, adapted by Newsela
For 95 percent of their time on Earth, humans have survived by foraging, that is, by hunting and gathering food from their environment.
The Evolution of Foraging

Finding food is no problem for most humans today. We live with mass-produced 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. It wasn’t until 11,000 years ago that we began to develop agriculture. Before *Homo sapiens* evolved, our hominine ancestors foraged for millions of years.

Foraging means relying on food provided by nature. We gathered plants and small animals, birds, and insects; 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? It’s hard to say. Yet, the common idea would be that humans, by means of our ability to use words, can share knowledge we’ve gathered over time. We passed it on to younger generations, and worked together cooperatively. These skills allowed humans to gradually make foraging easier and easier. They make us different from the rest of the animal kingdom.

In fact, one could say that foraging made us human. As fruit trees in the rain forest became less abundant 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, lost most of our body hair, developed smaller intestines and larger brains, and became better communicators. These are the hallmarks of being human.

One of the most significant steps that hominines ever took was to learn to control fire. They probably did 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 promoted language development. Improvements in language contributed to awareness and collective learning.

Humans gradually developed their skill in hunting. At first, hominines probably scavenged meat killed by other animals. They’d find a carcass and drag it to a safe place. Then they’d use their stone tools to butcher it. 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 life of any specific group of humans. However, we make generalizations about foragers. They must have possessed a detailed knowledge of their environment. They must have had a large territory in which to forage. If they lived in harsh environmental conditions that provided fewer food resources, they would need a very large area. A smaller area would suffice if food was abundant.

Most foragers lived by moving frequently. They slept in temporary camps. They might move with the seasons to follow animal migrations or the ripening of different plant food sources. 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 had been living 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, collectively they are known as the San, or the First People. They are most commonly called Bushmen.

How did the Bushmen survive as foragers in such harsh environmental conditions for so many years? Their survival has given the human community a valuable example of the skills of foragers in extremely challenging surroundings.
The Bushmen moved every day during the rainy season in search of greens to eat. They constructed simple shelters against the rain at night. During the dry season, however, they built more stable huts of branches and grass around water sources. Finding water was their main activity. Sometimes they had to dig deep holes wherever the sand was damp. They’d put hollow grass straws into the holes to sip water through. Often they’d store water in ostrich eggshells, which held about five cups, more than a day’s supply.

The tools of the Bushmen were simple. 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, a cloak to carry wood and food, smaller carrying bags, and a digging stick about three feet long and about an inch in diameter.

Nuts and roots were the basis of their diet. Women also collected fruit, berries, onions, and ostrich eggs. Insects — grasshoppers, beetles, caterpillars, moths, butterflies, and termites — supplied a portion of the Bushmen’s protein. Hunting was 20 percent of the total diet. Gathering provided the other 80 percent.

The Bushmen spent a large portion of their time in “leisure” activities — conversation, joking, singing, and dancing. Decisions were reached as a group. Women were relatively equal with men.

Studies of the Bushmen began in the 1950s when they still lived in the traditional way. By the 1990s, most had been forced to adopt farming. Some of their former hunting territories were turned into game preserves by African governments.
Debates about foraging

People who study foragers are archaeologists and anthropologists. Archaeologists examine human societies through material, cultural, and environmental records left behind. Their work includes human societies from the development of the first tools up to recent decades. Anthropologists study societies that today still live much like the ones before agriculture.

Both types of study are challenging and open to interpretation. Conclusions about ancient foragers reached from studying modern foragers are especially uncertain. Comparing them to ancient foragers is difficult since modern foragers cannot escape completely the world around them. Today’s foraging communities often use modern tools and partially rely on recent advances in technology. Their lands have also been greatly limited by development and the overall increase in the global population.

Traditionally, archaeologists and anthropologists have thought that men did the hunting in foraging societies. It was thought that women did the gathering. However, recent studies have challenged this view. People studying apes often point out that the females can provide for themselves and their offspring. They don’t need male assistance.

Among many current foraging societies, men and women are flexible about who hunts birds and animals. In some cultures, hunting and gathering roles are even exchanged. The current view holds that past foragers had flexible gender roles. Men or women might fill different jobs depending on individual skills, knowledge, and the local environment.

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 done among surviving foragers (the Bushmen in Botswana, the Aboriginals in Australia, and the Yanomami in the Brazilian rain forest) revealed that foragers enjoy good nutrition obtained in a few hours a day. The rest of their day is spent socializing and grooming. By the 1980s, this view was challenged. No agreement has yet been reached.

A third debate concerns how much human foragers affected their environment. For a long time, it was assumed that humans had little effect on nature until they developed agriculture.

Since the 1960s, scientists have questioned this assumption. They have pointed to two indications that foragers did make a significant impact. For one thing, archaeologists have found evidence that foragers set fire to large areas of land. Presumably they did this to drive animals out for killing. Burning land also promotes the growth of fresh plants that would provide food and attract animals. The Australian Aboriginal use of this practice was given the name “firestick farming.” These fires turned scrubland into grassland and suppressed some species, altering the environment.
In addition, whenever humans migrated into new parts of the world, a wave of extinctions of large animals occurred. 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. The rate of extinction was about 85 percent and included giant kangaroos and marsupial lions. 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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