

# Hunter-gatherer

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A **hunter-gatherer** or **forager**<sup>[1]</sup> society is one in which most or all food is obtained from wild plants and animals, in contrast to agricultural societies, which rely mainly on domesticated species.

Hunting and gathering was humanity's first and most successful adaptation, occupying at least 90 percent of human history, and until 12,000 years ago, all humans lived this way,<sup>[2]</sup> but following the invention of agriculture, hunter-gatherers have been displaced or conquered by farming or pastoralist groups in most parts of the world.

Only a few contemporary societies are classified as hunter-gatherers, and many supplement their foraging activity with horticulture and/or keeping animals.



Two Hadza men return from a hunt. The Hadza are one of the few contemporary African societies that live primarily by foraging.

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## Archaeological evidence

In the 1950s, Louis Binford suggested that early humans were obtaining meat via scavenging, not hunting.<sup>[3]</sup> Early humans in the Lower Paleolithic lived in forests and woodlands, which allowed them to collect seafood, eggs, nuts, and fruits besides scavenging. Rather than killing large animals for meat, according to this view, they used carcasses of such animals that had either been killed by predators or that had died of natural causes.<sup>[4]</sup>

According to the endurance running hypothesis, long-distance running as in persistence hunting, a method still practiced by some hunter-gatherer groups in modern times, was likely the driving evolutionary force leading to the evolution of certain human characteristics. This hypothesis does not necessarily contradict the scavenging hypothesis: both subsistence strategies could have been in use – sequentially, alternating or even simultaneously.

Hunting and gathering was presumably the subsistence strategy employed by human societies beginning some 1.8 million years ago, by *Homo erectus*, and from its appearance some 0.2 million years ago by *Homo sapiens*. It remained the only mode of subsistence until the end of the Mesolithic period some 10,000 years ago, and after this was replaced only gradually with the spread of the Neolithic Revolution.

Starting at the transition between the Middle to Upper Paleolithic period, some 80,000 to 70,000 years ago, some hunter-gatherers bands began to specialize, concentrating on hunting a smaller selection of (often larger) game and gathering a smaller selection of food. This specialization of work also involved creating specialized tools, like fishing nets and hooks and bone harpoons.<sup>[5]</sup> The transition into the subsequent Neolithic period is chiefly defined by the unprecedented development of nascent agricultural practices. Agriculture originated and spread in several different areas including the Middle East, Asia, Mesoamerica, and the Andes beginning as early as 12,000 years ago.

Forest gardening was also being used as a food production system in various parts of the world over this period. Forest gardens originated in prehistoric times along jungle-clad river banks and in the wet foothills of monsoon regions. In the gradual process of families improving their immediate environment, useful tree and vine species were identified, protected and improved, whilst undesirable species were eliminated. Eventually superior foreign species were selected and incorporated into the gardens.<sup>[6]</sup>

Many groups continued their hunter-gatherer ways of life, although their numbers have continually declined, partly as a result of pressure from growing agricultural and pastoral communities. Many of them reside in the developing world, either in arid regions or tropical forests. Areas that were formerly available to hunter-gatherers were—and continue to be—encroached upon by the settlements of agriculturalists. In the resulting competition for land use, hunter-gatherer societies either adopted these practices or moved to other areas. In addition, Jared Diamond has blamed a decline in the availability of wild foods, particularly animal resources. In North and South America, for example, most large mammal species had gone extinct by the end of the Pleistocene—according to Diamond, because of overexploitation by humans,<sup>[7]</sup> although the overkill hypothesis he advocates is strongly contested.

As the number and size of agricultural societies increased, they expanded into lands traditionally used by hunter-gatherers. This process of agriculture-driven expansion led to the development of the first forms of government in agricultural centers, such as the Fertile Crescent, Ancient India, Ancient China, Olmec, Sub-Saharan Africa and Norte Chico.

As a result of the now near-universal human reliance upon agriculture, the few contemporary hunter-gatherer cultures usually live in areas unsuitable for agricultural use.

Archaeologists can use evidence such as stone tool use to track hunter-gatherer activities, including mobility.<sup>[8]</sup>

## Common characteristics

*Further information: cultural universal*

## Habitat and population

Hunter-gatherer settlements may be either permanent, temporary, or some combination of the two, depending upon the mobility of the community. Mobile communities typically construct shelters using impermanent building materials, or they may use natural rock shelters, where they are available.

## Social and economic structure

Hunter-gatherers tend to have an egalitarian social ethos, although settled hunter-gatherers (for example, those inhabiting the Northwest Coast of North America) are an exception to this rule. Nearly all African hunter-gatherers are egalitarian, with women roughly as influential and powerful as men.<sup>[9]</sup>

The egalitarianism typical of human hunters and gatherers is never total, but is striking when viewed in an evolutionary context. One of humanity's two closest primate relatives, chimpanzees, are anything but egalitarian, forming themselves into hierarchies that are often dominated by an alpha male. So great is the contrast with human hunter-gatherers that it is widely argued by palaeoanthropologists that resistance to being dominated was a key factor driving the evolutionary emergence of human consciousness, language, kinship and social organization.<sup>[10][11][12]</sup>

Anthropologists maintain that hunter-gatherers don't have permanent leaders; instead, the person taking the initiative at any one time depends on the task being performed.<sup>[13][14][15]</sup> In addition to social and economic equality in hunter-gatherer societies, there is often, though not always, sexual parity as well.<sup>[13]</sup> Hunter-gatherers are often grouped together based on kinship and band (or tribe) membership.<sup>[16]</sup>

Postmarital residence among hunter-gatherers tends to be matriloca, at least initially.<sup>[17]</sup> Young mothers can enjoy childcare support from their own mothers, who continue living nearby in the same camp.<sup>[18]</sup> The systems of kinship and descent among human hunter-gatherers were relatively flexible, although there is evidence that early human kinship in general tended to be matrilineal.<sup>[19]</sup> A few groups, such as the Haida of present-day British Columbia, lived in such a rich environment that they could remain sedentary or semi-nomadic, like many other Native Americans of the Pacific Northwest coast.

It is easy for Western-educated scholars to fall into the trap of viewing hunter-gatherer social and sexual arrangements in the light of Western values. One common arrangement is the sexual division of labour, with women doing most of the gathering, while men concentrate on big game hunting. It might be imagined that this arrangement oppresses women, keeping them in the domestic sphere. However, according to some observers, hunter-gatherer women would not understand this interpretation. Since childcare is collective, with every baby having multiple mothers and male carers, the domestic sphere is not atomised or privatised but an empowering place to be. In all hunter-gatherer societies, women appreciate the meat brought back to camp by men. An illustrative account is Megan Biesele's study of



A San man from Namibia. The San still live full-time the traditional way, as hunter-gatherers.

the southern African Ju/'hoan, 'Women Like Meat'.<sup>[20]</sup> Recent archaeological research suggests that the sexual division of labor was the fundamental organisational innovation that gave *Homo sapiens* the edge over the Neanderthals, allowing our ancestors to migrate from Africa and spread across the globe.<sup>[21]</sup>

To this day, most hunter-gatherers have a symbolically structured sexual division of labour, most often conceptualised through an ideology of blood.<sup>[22]</sup> However, it is true that in a small minority of cases, women hunt the same kind of quarry as men, sometimes doing so alongside men. The best-known example are the Aeta people of the Philippines. According to one study, "About 85% of Philippine Aeta women hunt, and they hunt the same quarry as men. Aeta women hunt in groups and with dogs, and have a 31% success rate as opposed to 17% for men. Their rates are even better when they combine forces with men: mixed hunting groups have a full 41% success rate among the Aeta."<sup>[14]</sup> Among the Ju!'hoansi people of Namibia, women helped men during hunting by helping the men track down quarry.<sup>[23]</sup>

At the 1966 "Man the Hunter" conference, anthropologists Richard Borshay Lee and Irven DeVore suggested that egalitarianism was one of several central characteristics of nomadic hunting and gathering societies because mobility requires minimization of material possessions throughout a population. Therefore, no surplus of resources can be accumulated by any single member. Other characteristics Lee and DeVore proposed were flux in territorial boundaries as well as in demographic composition.



A 19th century engraving of an Indigenous Australian encampment.

At the same conference, Marshall Sahlins presented a paper entitled, "Notes on the Original Affluent Society", in which he challenged the popular view of hunter-gatherers lives as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short," as Thomas Hobbes had put it in 1651. According to Sahlins, ethnographic data indicated that hunter-gatherers worked far fewer hours and enjoyed more leisure than typical members of industrial society, and they still ate well. Their "affluence" came from the idea that they are satisfied with very little in the material sense. This satisfaction, Sahlins said, constituted a Zen economy.<sup>[24]</sup> Later, in 1996, Ross Sackett performed two distinct meta-analyses to empirically test Sahlin's view. The first of these studies looked at 102 time-allocation studies, and the second one analyzed 207 energy-expenditure studies. Sackett found that adults in foraging and horticultural societies work, on average, about 6.5 hours a day, where as people in agricultural and industrial societies work on average 8.8 hours a day.<sup>[25]</sup>

Recent research also indicates that the life-expectancy of hunter-gatherers is surprisingly high.<sup>[26]</sup>

Mutual exchange and sharing of resources (i.e., meat gained from hunting) are important in the economic systems of hunter-gatherer societies.<sup>[16]</sup> Therefore, these societies can be described as based on a "gift economy."

## Variability

Hunter-gatherer societies manifest significant variability, depending on climate zone/life zone, available technology and societal structure. Archaeologists examine hunter-gatherer tool kits to measure variability across different groups. Collard et al. (2005) found temperature to be the only statistically significant factor to impact hunter-gatherer tool kits.<sup>[27]</sup> Using temperature as a proxy for risk, Collard et al.'s results suggest that environments with extreme temperatures pose a threat to hunter-gatherer systems significant enough to warrant increased variability of tools. These results support Torrence's (1989) theory that risk of failure is indeed the most important factor in determining the structure of hunter-gatherer toolkits.<sup>[28]</sup>

One way to divide hunter-gatherer groups is by their return systems. James Woodburn uses the categories "immediate return" hunter-gatherers for egalitarian and "delayed return" for nonegalitarian. Immediate return foragers consume their food within a day or two after they procure it. Delayed return foragers store the surplus food (Kelly,<sup>[29]</sup> 31).

Hunting-gathering was the common human mode of subsistence throughout the Paleolithic, but the observation of current-day hunters and gatherers does not necessarily reflect Paleolithic societies; the hunter-gatherer cultures examined today have had much contact with modern civilization and do not represent "pristine" conditions found in uncontacted peoples.<sup>[30]</sup>

The transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture is not necessarily a one way process. It has been argued that hunting and gathering represents an adaptive strategy, which may still be exploited, if necessary, when environmental change causes extreme food stress for agriculturalists.<sup>[31]</sup> In fact, it is sometimes difficult to draw a clear line between agricultural and hunter-gatherer societies, especially since the widespread adoption of agriculture and resulting cultural diffusion that has occurred in the last 10,000 years. This anthropological view has remained unchanged since the 1960s.

## Modern and revisionist perspectives

In the early 1980s, a small but vocal segment of anthropologists and archaeologists attempted to demonstrate that contemporary groups usually identified as hunter-gatherers do not, in most cases, have a continuous history of hunting and gathering, and that in many cases their ancestors were agriculturalists and/or pastoralists who were pushed into marginal areas as a result of migrations, economic exploitation, and/or violent conflict (see, for example, the Kalahari Debate). The result of their effort has been the general acknowledgement that there has been complex interaction between hunter-gatherers and non-hunter-gatherers for millennia.



A Shoshone encampment in the Wind River Mountains of Wyoming, photographed by Percy Jackson, 1870

Some of the theorists who advocate this "revisionist" critique imply that, because the "pure hunter-gatherer" disappeared not long after colonial (or even agricultural) contact began, nothing meaningful can be learned about prehistoric hunter-gatherers from studies of modern ones (Kelly,<sup>[32]</sup> 24-29; see Wilmsen<sup>[33]</sup>)

Lee and Guenther have rejected most of the arguments put forward by Wilmsen.<sup>[34][35][36]</sup> Doron Shultziner and others have argued that we can learn a lot about the life-styles of prehistoric hunter-gatherers from studies of contemporary hunter-gatherers—especially their impressive levels of egalitarianism.<sup>[37]</sup>

Many hunter-gatherers consciously manipulate the landscape through cutting or burning undesirable plants while encouraging desirable ones, some even going to the extent of slash-and-burn to create habitat for game animals. These activities are on an entirely different scale to those associated with agriculture, but they are nevertheless domestication on some level. Today, almost all hunter-gatherers depend to some extent upon domesticated food sources either produced part-time or traded for products acquired in the wild.

Some agriculturalists also regularly hunt and gather (e.g., farming during the frost-free season and hunting during the winter). Still others in developed countries go hunting, primarily for leisure. In the Brazilian rainforest, those groups that recently did, or even continue to, rely on hunting and gathering techniques seem to have adopted this lifestyle, abandoning most agriculture, as a way to escape colonial control and as a result of the introduction of European diseases reducing their populations to levels where agriculture became difficult.

There are nevertheless a number of contemporary hunter-gatherer peoples who, after contact with other societies, continue their ways of life with very little external influence. One such group is the Pila Nguru (Spinifex people) of Western Australia, whose habitat in the Great Victoria Desert has proved unsuitable for European agriculture (and even pastoralism). Another are the Sentinelese of the Andaman Islands in the Indian Ocean, who live on North Sentinel Island and to date have maintained their independent existence, repelling attempts to engage with and contact them.

## Americas

*Main article: Paleo-Indians*

*See also: Paleo-Indians period (Canada) and History of Mesoamerica (Paleo-Indian)*

Evidence suggests big-game hunter gatherers crossed the Bering Strait from Asia (Eurasia) into North America over a land bridge (Beringia), that existed between 47,000–14,000 years ago.<sup>[39]</sup> Around 18,500-15,500 years ago, these hunter-gatherers are believed to



Three Indigenous Australians on Bathurst Island in 1939. According to Peterson (1998), the island was a population isolated for 6,000 years until the eighteenth century. In 1929, three-quarters of the population supported themselves off the bush.<sup>[38]</sup>

have followed herds of now-extinct Pleistocene megafauna along ice-free corridors that stretched between the Laurentide and Cordilleran ice sheets.<sup>[40]</sup> Another route proposed is that, either on foot or using primitive boats, they migrated down the Pacific coast to South America.<sup>[41][42]</sup>

Hunter-gatherers would eventually flourish all over the Americas, primarily based in the Great Plains of the United States and Canada, with offshoots as far east as the Gaspé Peninsula on the Atlantic coast, and as far south as Chile, Monte Verde. American hunter-gatherers were spread over a wide geographical area, thus there were regional variations in lifestyles. However, all the individual groups shared a common style of stone tool production, making knapping styles and progress identifiable. This early Paleo-Indian period lithic reduction tool adaptations have been found across the Americas, utilized by highly mobile bands consisting of approximately 25 to 50 members of an extended family.<sup>[43]</sup>

The Archaic period in the Americas saw a changing environment featuring a warmer more arid climate and the disappearance of the last megafauna.<sup>[44]</sup> The majority of population groups at this time were still highly mobile hunter-gatherers; but now individual groups started to focus on resources available to them locally, thus with the passage of time there is a pattern of increasing regional generalization like, the Southwest, Arctic, Poverty, Dalton and Plano traditions. This regional adaptations would become the norm, with reliance less on hunting and gathering, with a more mixed economy of small game, fish, seasonally wild vegetables and harvested plant foods.<sup>[45][46]</sup>

## See also

- Modern hunter-gatherers and other Nomads
- Anarcho-primitivism
- Human migration
- History of the world
- Indigenous peoples
- Neolithic Revolution
- Origins of society
- Paleolithic
- Prehistoric music
- Primitive skills
- Stateless society
- Tribe
- Clan

## Groups or societies

- Batek people
- San people
- Cimba people
- Cro-Magnon
- Hadza people
- Homo erectus
- Indigenous Australians
- Inuit
- Man of Flores



- Mbuti
- Neanderthals
- Nukak-Makú
- Pirahã
- Pygmies
- Samoa
- Sentinelese
- Spinifex People
- Uncontacted tribes
- Yupik

## Social movements

- Anarcho-primitivism, which strives for the abolishment of civilization and the return to a life in the wild.
- Freeganism involves gathering of food (and sometimes other materials) in the context of an urban or suburban environment.
- Gleaning involves the gathering of food that traditional farmers have left behind in their fields.
- Paleolithic diet, which strives to achieve a diet similar to that of ancient hunter-gatherer groups.
- Paleolithic lifestyle, which extends the paleolithic diet to other elements of the hunter-gatherer way of life, such as movement and contact with nature



Negritos in the Philippines, 1595

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## External links

- Nature's Secret Larder - Wild Foods & Hunting Tools. (<http://www.naturessecretlarder.co.uk>)
- A wiki dedicated to the scientific study of the diversity of foraging societies without recreating myths (<http://foragers.wikidot.com/start>)
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