

## THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF FORAGERS

**Robert L. Kelly**

*Department of Anthropology, University of Wyoming, USA*

**Keywords:** Hominid evolution, Acheulean, Mousterian, Upper Paleolithic, Clovis, Pleistocene, Holocene, egalitarian bands, conservation, ecotourism, Mikea.

### Contents

1. Introduction
2. The Rise of Hunting and Gathering
3. Holocene Foragers
4. Are Foragers Natural Conservationists?
5. The Nature of a Foraging Lifeway Today
6. Does Foraging have a Role in the Twenty-first Century?

Glossary

Bibliography

Biographical Sketch

### Summary

The hunting and gathering lifeway, as we know it from ethnographic data, has existed for at most the last 100 000 years, and less than 40 000 years in place. It was a successful economy for thousands of years, and still represents the economy for more than 90% of the time humans have existed as a species. At the end of the Pleistocene, foraging peoples living in small, nomadic egalitarian bands had colonized most of the Earth. After 10 000 years ago, there was a shift to agriculture in some places, or more intensive foraging adaptations in others, giving rise to nonegalitarian social forms. This prehistory points to the ability to be nomadic as a primary factor in the long-term success of foraging as a human adaptation. Analysis of ethnographic data shows that there is no reason to expect hunter-gatherers to act in a conservation-minded way, or to intentionally and altruistically limit their population growth. Although there are no peoples left today who are full-time foragers, it is likely that mixed economies that include foraging in an economic portfolio will continue to be an important element of rural economies in many areas of the world.

### 1. Introduction

The human species has spent some 99% of its time as an evolutionary line separate from the other primates as foragers, living with neither domesticated plant foods nor animals. Yet, this lifeway, once said to be the most successful adaptation humanity ever developed, changed rapidly in the last 10 000 years and even more rapidly in the past 500 years.

Two related questions are the focus of this chapter. First, foraging is said to have been a successful adaptation in part because in the past humans were allegedly more environmentally-conscious, and intentionally avoided overexploitation. Agriculture is

said to have changed all that, eventually leading to overpopulation, extensive environmental modification (e.g. deforestation), periodic starvation, large overpopulated cities, the pursuit of material pleasures, etc. Is it true that foragers are “natural conservationists”?

Second, there are virtually no people today who live exclusively, year-round, on foraged foods. But there are populations for whom foraged foods are an integral part of their subsistence economies, economies whose portfolios include horticulture, wage labor, craft production, cash-cropping, and eco-tourism (Figure 1). Foraging has a long and essential role in human evolution, but does it have a place in the twenty-first century?



Figure 1. World map showing the location of some modern peoples who incorporate foraging into their economic portfolio.

-  
-  
-

TO ACCESS ALL THE 16 PAGES OF THIS CHAPTER,  
Visit: <http://www.eolss.net/Eolss-sampleAllChapter.aspx>

## Bibliography

Burch E. S. and Ellanna L. J. (1994). *Key Issues in Hunter-Gatherer Research*. Oxford: Berg Publishers. [Papers developed from the 1990 International Conference on Hunting and Gathering Societies, covering issues of gender, territoriality, work, social stratification, culture contact, government intervention, and native perspectives.]

Gowdy J. (1998). *Limited Wants, Unlimited Means: A Reader on Hunter-Gatherer Economics and the Environment*. Washington DC: Island Press. [A reader that contains reprints of classic and most recent ground-breaking articles that focus on the issue of affluence.]

Lee R. B. (1979). *The !Kung San: Men, Women and Work in a Foraging Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [A thorough ethnographic description of one of the world's best-known foraging peoples.]

Lee R. B. and Daly R., eds. (1999). *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Hunter-Gatherers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [A recent and readable compendium of short ethnographic sketches of foraging peoples from around the globe, including chapters on the history of anthropological thought on foraging, foraging culture, and foragers in a global economy.]

Lee R. B. and DeVore I. (1968). *Man the Hunter*. Chicago: Aldine. [This is a classic collection of articles from the 1966 conference of the same name that overturned the “nasty, brutish, and short” image of foraging and established the notion of hunter-gatherers as the original affluent society.]

Kelly R. L. (1995). *The Foraging Spectrum: Diversity in Hunter-Gatherer Lifeways*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press. [A review of the diversity present in hunter-gatherer lifeways from the perspective of behavioral ecology, covering issues of subsistence, mobility, territoriality, demography, gender, and sociopolitical organization.]

Kent S., ed. (1996). *Cultural Diversity among Twentieth-Century Foragers: An African Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [A set of articles that focus on explaining diversity within and between the well-known hunting and gathering populations of sub-Saharan Africa.]

Ingold T., Riches D., and Woodburn J. (1988). *Hunters and Gatherers, Volume 1: History, Evolution, and Social Change*. Oxford: Berg Publishers.

Ingold T., Riches D., and Woodburn J. (1988). *Hunters and Gatherers, Volume 2: Property, Power and Ideology*. Oxford: Berg Publishers. [These two volumes contain papers from the 1986 International Conference on Hunting and Gathering Societies, covering a wide range of subjects from property rights and symbols to history and evolutionary processes.]

Winterhalder B. and Smith E. A. (1981). *Hunter-Gatherer Foraging Strategies: Ethnographic and Archeological Analyses*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. [One of the earliest compendiums of ethnographic and archaeological research into hunter-gatherer societies from the perspective of behavioral ecology.]

## Biographical Sketch

**Robert L. Kelly** is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Wyoming and President of the Society for American Archaeology. He is former chair of Anthropology at the University of Louisville. Kelly received his Ph.D. from the University of Michigan in 1985. His research interests lie in hunter-gatherer societies, evolutionary ecology, stone tool analysis, and the late Pleistocene colonization of the western hemisphere. He has conducted research into the archaeology of hunting and gathering societies in the western U.S. for 30 years. He also has conducted ethnographic research with the Mikea of Madagascar. Kelly is the author of nearly 100 articles, monographs, delivered papers, reviews, and books. His 1995 book *The Foraging Spectrum: Diversity in Hunting and Gathering Societies* was a Choice Outstanding Academic Book of 1996. His most recent research book is *Prehistory of the Carson Desert and Stillwater Mountains, Nevada: Environment, Mobility and Subsistence*.