

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF FORAGERS

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

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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.

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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*.