

# Foraging: Life as a Hunter-Gatherer

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Two Bushmen hunters rest. Photo by: Anthony Bannister/Gallo Images/CORBISM

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

Finding food is no problem for many humans today. It is not hard to find restaurants and stores full of factory-made food. Now imagine trying to find food every day in the wild. That is just what humans (*Homo sapiens*) have done for most of their time on Earth. It wasn't until 11,000 years ago that we learned how to farm. Before *Homo sapiens* evolved, our hominin – pre-human – ancestors foraged for millions of years.

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

Humans are not the only creatures who forage; many animals do, too. But because humans could speak, we could gather knowledge over time. We would pass what we learned on to younger generations. This skill helped humans become better foragers.

In fact, in some ways, foraging made us human. As fruit trees in the rain forest became less common in the cooling, drying climate, the hominins who survived had to find other food sources. As they did, they began to evolve. They – we – began walking on two feet, and lost most of our body hair. Our intestines became smaller and our brains grew larger. We became better communicators. In other words, we became human.

One of the most significant steps that hominins took was to control fire. They probably learned how to do it by tending fires started by lightning. Scientists believe hominins may have used fire to cook more than a million years ago.



Cooked food provided more nutrition. Most importantly, it contributed to the size of our brains. Eating and chatting together around a fire may have also helped languages develop.

Humans gradually improved their hunting skills. At first, hominins probably scavenged meat from the bodies of dead animals. 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 affect the lives of any group of humans. However, all foragers must have possessed a detailed knowledge of their surroundings. They needed a large enough territory to move around in and forage.

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

Mother's milk provided the only food for babies. They would nurse their children for years. In these close-knit groups, foragers usually shared food. It seems like foraging societies were the fairest in human history.

## The Bushmen of southern Africa

Until not long ago, five different groups of people had been living as foragers in the same place for 30,000 years. They lived in the Kalahari Desert of Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa. Together, they were known as the Bushmen.

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 bodies of water. 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. For gathering, the women used a blanket, or a sling made of hide to carry wood. They dug in the ground with sticks about 3 feet long.

Their diet was mostly nuts and roots. Women also collected fruit, berries, onions, and ostrich eggs. Insects gave Bushmen protein. Hunting gave them only a fifth of their food. Gathering provided the rest.

The Bushmen spent a large part of their time talking, joking, singing, and dancing. They reached decisions as a group. Women were almost equal with men.

By the 1990s, most had been forced to take up farming. Some of their hunting grounds were turned into wildlife preserves by African governments.

## Debates about foraging

Foragers are studied by archaeologists and anthropologists. Archaeologists examine human societies through material, cultural, and environmental records. Anthropologists study societies today that still live much like ancient ones.

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

Traditionally, archaeologists and anthropologists thought that men did the hunting in foraging societies. They thought women did the gathering. However, recent studies of current foragers led them to challenge this view. Among many current foraging societies, men and women are flexible about who hunts.

Another ongoing debate among experts is about how well foragers lived. Foragers used to be thought of as having short, difficult lives. In the 1960s, scientists studied surviving foragers, including the Bushmen in Botswana, and believed that they enjoyed good nutrition after foraging for just a few hours a day. The rest of their day was spent socializing. But now, researchers are not sure this view was correct.

Also, there are still questions about how much human foragers affected their surroundings. For a long time, it was assumed that humans had little effect on nature until they began to farm.

Since the 1960s, scientists have also questioned this view. For one thing, archaeologists have found evidence that foragers set fire to large areas. They may have done this to drive animals out into the open or to help fresh plants grow. New plants would be another source of food, and would also draw more animals.

In addition, whenever humans migrated into new areas, extinction of large animals followed. It is possible, though, that a combination of climate change, hunting, and other human activity may be responsible.