Foraging Communities and Networks

By Bridgette Byrd O’Connor

Most history courses tend to only focus on the last 12,000 years. That’s because this period of human history came after the creation of farming, complex societies and writing. But what about the previous 238,000 years of human existence? How did we produce and distribute the stuff we needed—especially food—before farming and writing?
Introduction

Social studies and history classes often focus on a short period of human history: the most recent 12,000 years. It makes sense, as we have the most information about this period. This time came after the creation of farming, complex societies, and writing. However, modern humans have been on Earth for about 250,000 years. What about these older groups? How did we produce and distribute the stuff we needed—especially food—before farming and writing? We foraged for it, meaning we hunted and gathered it.

Humans have been nomadic (roaming) foragers for a much longer period of time than they’ve been sedentary (settled) farmers. Once people began farming, many communities still continued to forage. In fact, some foraging communities still exist today. Foragers survived for a long time. So we could say that foraging must have been a pretty good way to obtain resources and nourish the body. But what does it mean to be a forager?

The foraging way of life

Foraging is the gathering and hunting of food. Humans aren’t the only ones who forage. Many animal species gather resources from the environment. Some are scavengers, eating other animals that have died. Other animals are predators, hunting their prey. Foraging means taking what you need from your environment in order to survive.

In foraging communities, humans generally lived in smaller family units of around 20-50 people. Foragers had to move around. This way they could obtain more resources once one area had been picked over. It’s much easier to organize a smaller group of people to move in the same direction at the same time.
Foraging communities also seemed to space out the birth of children in a family. Since foraging families had to move around often, they may have tried to limit the number of small children that would have to be carried on their journeys. Perhaps foraging women breastfed their children for long periods of time. Breastfeeding can sometimes reduce the chances of pregnancy. That would likely have limited the number of children they had.

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Labor in foraging communities may have been divided based on gender. Men would hunt and women would gather. But the work of both was necessary for survival. It was probably viewed as equal in the eyes of the group.

Anthropologists are experts who study human societies and cultures. They’ve studied modern foraging societies, and archaeologists have studied early human sites. They’ve concluded that most foragers relied mainly on plant-based diets. Meat was valuable, but rare. In fact, gathering probably supplied the community with most of its food. Hunting and fishing, meanwhile, could be unreliable sources of regular meals. In some places women did more of the foraging. This suggests that their work was valued as much as that of men. This equality was different than later farming societies, who ranked people based on their wealth or gender.

Still, foraging communities may have had some social divisions. Foraging divisions were probably based on age. Older members of the community may have been given more respect or power.

Foraging groups also likely had more free time. Hunting and gathering did not take up the whole day. Most of the community’s resources could be gathered in about 4-6 hours of the day. So, foragers had more time to sit by the fire and share stories than those who would later become farmers. Twenty-first-century humans work on average between 8-9 hours per day. Of course, I’m sure most of us would love to simply work for 4-6 hours and enjoy our families and friends’ company most of the day.

A forager’s diet was also probably healthier than that of a farmer. Studies show that modern-day foragers eat a more varied diet and exercised more compared to modern-day non-foragers. A healthy diet and more free time are certainly positive parts of foraging life. However, this does not mean that life was totally easy.

For example, foragers had much shorter life expectancies. The average forager lived between 21 and 37 years. The average person today lives 66 years. But these numbers move up and down. For example, life expectancy in Japan...
is 82 years. In Zambia, the African country, it’s 39 years (Gurven and Kaplan 2017). One of the main reasons for this extended life expectancy is due to medicine. It improved as human history progressed. There’s also evidence of violence in foraging communities. In addition, some members of foraging groups were left behind if they were too old or too ill to keep up.

Less work hours meant that foragers also had more time to meet up with other communities in their area. They could create small networks. They shared food, tools, weapons, and ideas. These interactions led foraging groups to build early trade networks. Foraging communities also may have met up for spiritual or religious purposes. They could have shared beliefs about spiritual matters, including shared rituals and practices. Stonehenge in England may have been such a site, some archaeologists believe.
A transition to a more settled way of life

Human communities lived exclusively as foragers for over 200,000 years. But humans started to spread around the Earth. Some began to transition from foraging to a more settled way of life. Some of the earliest communities to make this transition were those that happened to live in areas of abundance, like river valleys. Fertile soil and fresh water provided many resources. As the climate warmed toward the end of the last ice age—about 12,000 years ago—these areas became lush. As a result, some human groups no longer had to move around as much to follow their food sources. These groups were some of the first to make a slow, long transition from foraging. They would move to a settled way of life, eventually tending to animals and plants. While many communities continued to forage long after climates warmed, some did embark on a new path of farming. This new way of getting food presented challenges. But farming marks a significant transition in human history.
Sources


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Bridgette Byrd O’Connor holds a DPhil in history from the University of Oxford and has taught Big History, World History, and AP U.S. Government and Politics for the past ten years at the high school level. In addition, she has been a freelance writer and editor for the Big History Project and the Crash Course World History and U.S. History curriculums.

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