

A Question of Survival: Hunters and Gatherers vs. Farming and Agriculture

By Ms. Thatcher

It isn't easy to survive, a fact we have a hard time understanding in our 21st Century world of supermarkets, indoor plumbing, and houses. Our ancestors, however, spent much of their time worrying where their next meal was coming from and how they were going to get it. Some chose to survive through hunting the different animals in their territory and gathering plants that were native to their environment, while others decided farming was a better system to use. Although we may think today that agriculture (farming) is the best way to produce food, many peoples in our past chose to be hunters and gatherers instead. Both systems have benefits for the people who use them, and each creates many challenges for the cultures who rely on them for survival. Let's compare them!



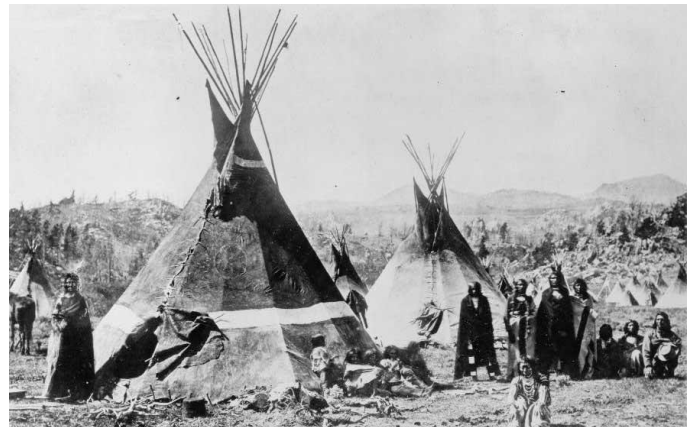
Petroglyph of an ancient hunter; Range Creek, Utah

1) The family groups in hunter-gatherer societies were very different than early farmers' families. Hunters and gatherers had smaller families (parents and kids) of 3-6 people. Mothers could not have another baby until her last child was old enough to walk, or she would have a hard time gathering enough plants for her family to eat. Having too many children could lead to sad and difficult choices for hunter-gatherer families. Some traditional tribes, like the Ute, even thought twins were unlucky because they made it harder for their family to gather enough food to survive.

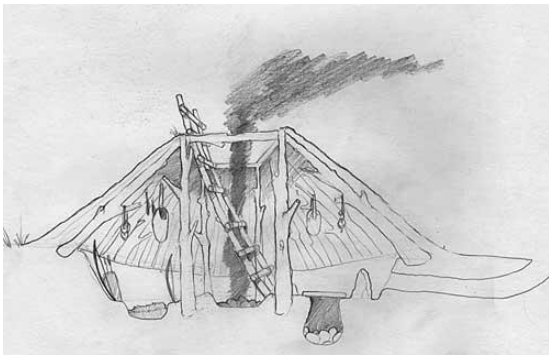
Farm families, on the other hand, were very large! Many farmers had 10-15 people in their immediate family. Although mothers still had a lot of work to do on the farm, the benefit of having lots of children to help do chores made it worth mom having a child every other year or so. This had a sad side effect, however, as maternal death rates increased. One in one hundred births resulted in the mother dying from child birth. Today the rate is 24 deaths in 100,000 births.

2) Family size created very different communities in hunter-gatherer societies than in farming cultures. Hunter-Gatherers tend to have small, very mobile (movable) communities of less than 100 people who were usually related to each other (cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents). To help the next generation find husbands and wives, different groups would come together in much larger communities of +2,000 people for celebrations, religious services, etc. throughout the year, much as we get together for holidays like Thanksgiving today. But the population of hunter-gatherers was very stable, growing very, very slowly if at all! This meant that they didn't have to worry about getting more and more food over the years. Farming societies, on the other hand, were very large in comparison. Several hundred to thousands of people lived together in small spaces that eventually became towns and cities. Farming societies never had to worry about finding a spouse (wife/husband), but they also had lots of noisy and nosy neighbors to deal with! Farming communities also were constantly growing from the large numbers of children families had, leading an endless circle of population growth leading to a demand for more food to feed more and more people! Huge populations could make it difficult to grow enough food and provide for everyone.

3) The search for food sources kept hunter-gatherer groups on the move! Communities moved with the seasons, traveling to lots of different places where they knew they could find food. In the Fall, they might search for berries in mountain forests while in the Spring they might move into the valleys to gather grass seeds. Hunter-gatherers also knew where to find natural resources to make tools, weapons, clothing, etc. They also could trade with groups from other areas for things they could not get in their own environment. Groups here in Utah could, for example, trade stone like obsidian for sea shells from the California coast. Farmers, however, needed to stay in one place to tend their farms and protect their homes. They also could trade for supplies and resources, but were far less mobile than hunter-gatherers.



Shoshoni tipis were easy to move, making them ideal dwellings for hunter-gatherers.



This drawing reconstructs a Fremont Indian pithouse, which was a common dwelling for early farmers in Utah.

4) Hunter-gatherers had very different dwellings (houses) than farmers. Many hunter-gatherer groups had movable houses like tipis or tents. Some used semi-permanent houses, like wicki-ups, that could be abandoned for much of the year, but easily repaired and used when the tribe was in the area. Some groups knew where caves could be found in their environment, which was a natural shelter for their families. Farmers, however, need to protect their fields from dangers such as insects, foraging animals, and other humans. This led to permanent houses being created, often in villages that grew larger and larger as the population of the farming community increased. Some groups even developed apartment-like houses. But there are many problems that come from lots of people living in a small space. What do you do with your garbage? How do you defend your home from other groups that might want your land? Having permanent homes did not necessarily mean life was easier for farmers than for hunter-gatherers.

5) These two lifestyles also used natural resources in different ways. Hunter-gatherers tended to use a lot of resources, but in short bursts similar to other animals in their environment. They also used fire to encourage new plant growth and encouraged resources, like fruit trees, to grow. Agriculture (farming) also requires many different natural resources, but in a much larger scale than hunter-gatherers. Villages, towns and cities require massive amounts of water, wood, stone, and other resources to create their structures, take care of their animals, and do other jobs that are needed in a complex society. Farmers need a lot more natural resources than hunter-gatherers.

6) Agricultural civilizations have very different social structures (people organization) than hunter-gatherer groups. Farmers must work for many hours a day to take care of their fields, their livestock (cows, chickens, horses, etc.), and their homes. Most traditional farmers work between 8 to 16 hours per day. Hunter-gatherers, on the other hand, work far fewer hours typically. Only 2 to 4 hours per day were spent gathering food, and the rest of their time was spent making tools, clothing, shelters, moving to other areas, etc.

7) The differences you have read about so far also changed how people interacted with each other in their society. Hunter-gatherers tended not to store food because they have to move frequently (every few months). Because they could not store their food, if families had extra they often gave it to their neighbors with the hope that their neighbors would share extra food with them if times got tough. This sharing led to a very egalitarian (equal, everyone treated the same) society. Men and women each had jobs to do that were equally important. Women tended to gather plants and small game while the men of the tribe hunted larger animals. This equality also meant that there were usually no social classes (rich, poor, royal, peasant) in hunter-gatherer groups. Slavery was rare and usually a short term (a few years) condition before the slave was adopted into the tribe or returned to their people.

Farming societies, on the other hand, were quite different. Being able to store food in granaries meant that people tended to share less with their neighbors and conflicts between different groups over food resources meant that there was more war and fighting, which could involve thousands of people. Because farmers could grow more food than they needed, farming societies development of different social classes. Some people remained farmers while others became warriors, priests, kings, merchants, or other professions common in cities and towns. Slavery was also more common than in hunter-gatherer societies and slaves tended to serve for longer or even remained slaves for their entire lives. Women also lost many rights and freedoms in most agricultural civilizations. In fact, females were frequently seen as the property of their fathers or husband! Obviously, farming brought a lot of changes to human cultures.



Granaries, like the one in this photo from Range Creek, were used to store corn by the Fremont people of Utah.

8) Because not everyone had to farm in order to get enough food in agricultural societies, people began to do specialized jobs. Farmers who had extra food could sell that food in markets or to merchants in larger cities. These merchants could also collect other merchandise (like fabrics, tools, art, etc.) to sell to their customers. This made some people very wealthy. These rich individuals often became the leaders of the society because they had time to organize how their cities operated. This also meant that they needed to be more educated. Agricultural societies need people who could record information to keep track of all the trading that went on. Scribes spent many years learning how to write the complex early languages of Egypt, Mexico, China, etc. Some of these elites spent their time focusing on their religious beliefs, leading to very complex religions across the world. And these societies often thought that they needed someone to oversee their whole civilization...like a king! There were many jobs to be done in these farming societies.

Hunter-gatherers, in contrast, do not have a lot of specialization in their cultures. Everyone needed to learn basic survival skills to help their community thrive. Young girls would all learn how to cook, make clothes, gather wild plants, find medicinal herbs, catch small animals, etc. In fact, women were typically responsible for providing most of the food their families needed to survive on a day to day basis! This appears to have led to women being more highly regarded and respected in hunter-gatherer groups than in farming cultures. Young men were usually taught how to make tools for hunting and how to track animals in the different territories their family traveled to. Depending on the tribe, women and men either shared religious duties and leadership roles for their communities or they were done by men.

9) Different types of education were used by hunter-gatherer and farming cultures. In hunter-gatherer societies there was no formal school. Instead, boys and girls were typically taught by their parents and their clan (relatives) the skills they needed to survive. Farming civilizations, on the other hand, eventually developed complex writing systems that required specialized training. This led to the first real schools and teachers! But only the wealthiest and smartest children (and only boys in most civilizations!) were educated. Most of us would not be allowed to go to school! We would remain poor peasant farmers or laborers, whose lives were typically brutal and short!! Most peasants lived to 25-30, and only if they were lucky or healthy enough to survive their first 5 years of life. Typically only 1 in 4 children lived past the age of 5 in farming cultures!

10) One last, and extremely important difference between hunter-gatherers and farmers is their health and life span. Typically, hunter-gatherers were more healthy than early farmers! Hunter-gatherers had a better, more varied diet that included meat, vegetables, fruits, grains and very little sugars. They had few if any cavities in their teeth from poor diets (so they didn't need dentists!) and rarely suffered from communicable diseases (sickness spread by coughing, sneezing, etc.) because their populations were so spread out. If they survived the first few years of life and avoided accidents common in hunting and traveling, hunter-gatherers could expect to live a longer life than farmers. In fact, when Europeans first came to North America the Native peoples they met were taller, healthier than the Europeans!

Farmers, on the other hand, did not have a balanced diet and often suffered from a lack of important nutrients. Most poor people (about 70-90% of a population) only had grains like corn or wheat to eat. They rarely ate meat (it was very expensive!) and didn't get much variety in their diet. Because of this, early farmers often were sickly, short people. Their teeth were usually filled with cavities. In fact, their teeth could actually be worn away from eating so much stone-ground grains!! Diseases were common in towns and cities, which were often absolutely filthy!! Thousands of people in crowded places produce massive amounts of garbage and bodily waste! Worse still, stored crops attracted rats, mice, insects and other pests that spread terrible diseases like the Black Death (bubonic plague)!! Obviously, health was a problem for most early farmers. It has only been in the last 100 years that modern science and technology has allowed humans to combat the problems of malnutrition and diseases that killed millions of our farmer ancestors in the past.

As you can see, there are benefits and problems whether you are a hunter-gatherer or a farmer. Cultures had to make vast changes to their lifestyles to survive with either system. If you had lived at another time in the past, without our science and technology, which do you think would have been a better way to survive? Why?