

# the hunters are the hunted

For 99 per cent of its history, humanity survived by hunting the available fauna and gathering what it could from the land. Today, fewer than 300 hunter-gatherer groups remain. Dr Daniel Stiles, who has studied hunter-gatherer societies for more than 25 years, examines the status of the existing communities around the world

IN APRIL 1966 THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL Conference on Hunting and Gathering, or CHAGS, dubbed 'Man the Hunter', was held in Chicago. The 75 anthropologists and archaeologists who attended looked at 20th-century hunter-gatherers as relicts of the past; people who still behaved like our prehistoric ancestors. The more 'untouched' a group, the more value it had to social science because its behaviour was thought to be closer to our evolutionary precursors. Discussions centred on questions of ecology, demography, social and territorial organisation, marriage and kinship, and how hunter-gatherer groups could act as models or analogues in explaining questions of archaeological interpretation or behavioural and cultural evolution. The people themselves had no part to play.

## Speaking for themselves

Since that time, hunter-gatherer studies have developed considerably. The ninth CHAGS conference convened last year to review the status of hunting and gathering communities the world over. Among the 250-300 participants were many hunter-gatherers who were given the opportunity to speak for themselves.

The preoccupation with ecological and human evolutionary issues took a back seat to questions of human and natural-resource rights, gender and child roles in their societies, knowledge systems, myths, dreams, cosmology and rituals, questions of egalitarianism and sharing and problems of discrimination, assimilation and relations with the nation-state. An important new area of study is hunter-gatherer perceptions of the environment and how this relates to

## A way of life

Humans evolved over millions of years as hunter-gatherers. The pressure to succeed profoundly affected our genetic makeup as natural selection worked its wonders. Why our ancestors shifted from quadrupedal, vegetarian apes to bipedal omnivores has been the subject of much speculation, with as yet no firm answers. Archaeological evidence suggests that the earliest humans were opportunistic, scavenging predator kills and hunting animals when possible. Plants probably made up the bulk of the diet in tropical climates, but when humans migrated into northern areas in Asia and Europe a million years ago,

Inuit hunter on Baffin Island, Nunavut, Canada. The hunting rifle, pick-up truck and snow mobile have revolutionised their way of life

STAFFAN WIDSTRAND/CORBIS

biodiversity conservation and conflicts with indigenous rights.

Foragers, once 'primitive' objects of study, are now participants in our attempts to understand and appreciate the diversity, complexity, ingenuity and imagination of hunter-gatherer communities. Many can now talk about the serious problems of state abuse that continue to plague some of them.

The one issue that concerns all hunter-gatherers was described by members Kenya's Ogiek community: "There is no other item but land. Land, as the minority knows it, is their everything... Land is a source of physical life, food and existence. It also brings social life, marriage, status, security and politics. In short, it is our world."

Hunter-gatherer groups must, by definition, live where there is an abundance of wild animals and plants. These areas are usually remote, but since the mid-20th century, governments and businesses interested in exploiting the natural wealth of wild tracts of land have embarked on a natural-resource bonanza. As hardwood timbers, oil and gas, diamonds, gold, potential farmlands and other valuable commodities have been plundered, hunter-gatherers have been dispossessed – often intimidated and beaten, and sometimes killed, in the process. Even when land has been worth little, they have been chased away in favour of landless peasants or cattle and sheep. The hunter-gatherers end up wards of the state in makeshift resettlement camps or, worse, squatters living anywhere they can find.

The outlook for hunter-gatherer peoples is not good. Sub-Saharan Africa has about 300,000 nominal hunter-

gatherers, but only around 118,000 of them actually practise the lifestyle. Madagascar holds one of the most 'pure' hunter-gatherer groups still alive – the Mikea, who inhabit the dry forests of the southwest.

In Southeast Asia, Negrito tribes live a similarly isolated life, only emerging from the forests to buy rice. Some anthropologists speculate that they are remnants of an African migration of early *Homo sapiens* that began as long as 100,000 years ago. But today, like many of their cousins, they face grave problems of deforestation, agricultural expansion and absorption by mainstream culture.

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Surprisingly, Europe almost equals Asia in its number of hunting peoples – mainly the Saami of Scandinavia and the Narod Severa of Siberian Russia. None live as their ancestors did, but some still engage in reindeer herding, hunting, trapping and fishing.

### Legal battles

Similarly, there are about 30,000 Inuit in Canada (see *Geographical*, March 1999) and the USA and various Cree, Gwich'in and Algonquin peoples in North America who engage in caribou and moose hunting, whaling, trapping and fishing. Many of these peoples won important court cases in the 1980s and '90s gaining rights to large areas of land with huge oil, gas, mineral and hydroelectric resources. However, the clash of cultures has resulted in high incidences

of alcoholism, drug addiction and suicide. Former hunting peoples of the USA, such as the Paiute and Shoshone, have abandoned the practice, but they try to retain many of the spiritual and cultural practices of their forefathers.

### Untouched tribes

The Upper Amazon of South America is the only remaining place with so-called uncontacted peoples – thought to be around 30–50 small groups. Like other Amazonian Indians, they probably practise some horticulture and have some contact with neighbouring Indian groups who have more regular relations with non-indigenous South Americans.

Australia is home to about 240,000 Aboriginal people, most of whom live in towns and cities. The few who live in a traditional manner have taken it up anew in search of a lost identity after living for decades on out-stations as wards of the state. In August 2002, Aboriginal people lost a seminal court case in which they requested the rights to subsurface resources.

Today, international organisations such as the UK's Survival International local associations such as ANAI and CIMI in Brazil, and Kenya's Ogiek Welfare Council work to save tribes from cultural extinction. There is no question that hunter-gatherer societies will continue to undergo cultural change – as all societies do. The main issue is whether they will do it on their own terms, in their own ways and on their own land.

meat must have become an important food source, particularly in winter. Social cooperation, along with stone, bone and wooden tools were the foundation of humanity's progress for the first three million years.

Around 10,000 BC, all humans lived by hunting and gathering. They had colonised virtually the entire world. The great variety of habitats and climates resulted in an equally diverse range of ways to live off the land, which also contributed to astonishing cultural heterogeneity. In the tropics, change wasn't radical, though new tool technologies were introduced. Societies continued to be nomadic and hunt and gather much as they did in the Pleistocene. In the

temperate Nile Valley, western Asia and the Far East, foragers began concentrating on the grains of wild grasses, which stimulated the invention of pottery for boiling and storage. Here, and in northern Eurasia, some communities began to manage herds of wild goats, sheep, cattle and reindeer, probably as a result of human population pressure and increased competition for resources. People began to spend more time in one place. By 8,000 BC, permanent mud and baked-earth structures began to appear as communities developed reliable food sources by domesticating plants and animals. Food preservation and storage became critical to year-round habitation

in northern regions, though many communities continued to migrate with game herds. Settling down and managing surplus food led to profound social changes, including different forms of reciprocity, ownership of resources, trade and marriage rules.

Remarkably, domestication and sedentary living emerged independently between 10,000 and 6,000 years ago in many parts of northern Africa, Europe, Asia and the Americas, but with different wild progenitors in each region. Pandora's Box was open, and surplus food was the foundation for social hierarchies, socio-economic specialisation and the march of civilisation.

# hunter-gatherer distribution

There is a tremendous variety of peoples who, until recently, depended on the undomesticated bounty of nature for survival. Dr Stiles has estimated how many groups today can be classified as hunter-gatherers, what the population of each group is, and what proportion of this population is still involved in hunting and gathering. Since no official censuses have been directed towards hunter-gatherers the numbers are based on estimates from literature and educated guesses from visits in the field. In many instances the broad definition of 'group' is based on geography or ethno-linguistics. For example, many subdivisions of San bushmen, pygmies and Ogiek in Africa have been grouped together; as have those of Gonds, Birhors and Bhils in India, Aboriginal 'sub-tribes' in Australia, Yanomama in Brazil, Inuit in the Arctic and Agta in the Philippines.

According to Dr Stiles' research, there are currently between 235 and 265 groups of hunter-gatherers in the world today, up to 1.3 million people in all. However, only 170,000 to 218,000 of them continue to hunt animals or gather wild plants for food or other uses – typically trade, construction and medicine – as their principal activity. Less than 11,000 live with minimal influence from the outside world. With a few exceptions, hunter-gatherers today are restricted to small, isolated areas surrounded by agricultural or industrial neighbours.



## North and Central America

**1** Between 70,000 and 90,000 hunting peoples remain, mainly in **Canada** and **Alaska**. Only 15,000–25,000 continue to practise hunting, trapping or fishing as their principal activity, and the high-powered rifle, pick-up truck and snow mobile have altered their methods drastically. The **Gwich'in** live on the plains of the Yukon and Mackenzie rivers of Alaska and Canada. Even though they live an essentially modern lifestyle, they use hunting as a way to preserve aspects of their traditional culture. No hunting groups have survived in Central America between the USA and Colombia.

## South America

**2** In and around the **Amazon** basin there are around 50–70 groups that are thought to hunt and gather regularly, with an estimated population of between 20,000 and 30,000; groups such as the **Ayoreo** of **Paraguay** remain

isolated from modern society. Another 10,000–20,000 have now settled, cultivating crops or undertaking waged work. The 350 **Awá** of northeastern **Brazil** were completely nomadic until recently, living in palm-leaf shelters and surviving by fishing, hunting and gathering forest nuts and fruit. First contacted by outsiders in 1973, they have been squeezed off their land by cattle ranchers who hired gunmen to hunt them down. As a condition for funding a huge iron-ore mine in the Awá area, the World Bank has insisted that all Indian land be demarcated. Ranchers have prevented it since 1982.

## Europe

**3** The 60,000 or so **Saami** or **Lapps** of northern **Scandinavia** and **Russia** used to live entirely from rearing reindeer, trapping for furs and fishing, but fewer than ten per cent of these do so today. Fallout from Soviet nuclear bomb tests and the Chernobyl disaster has

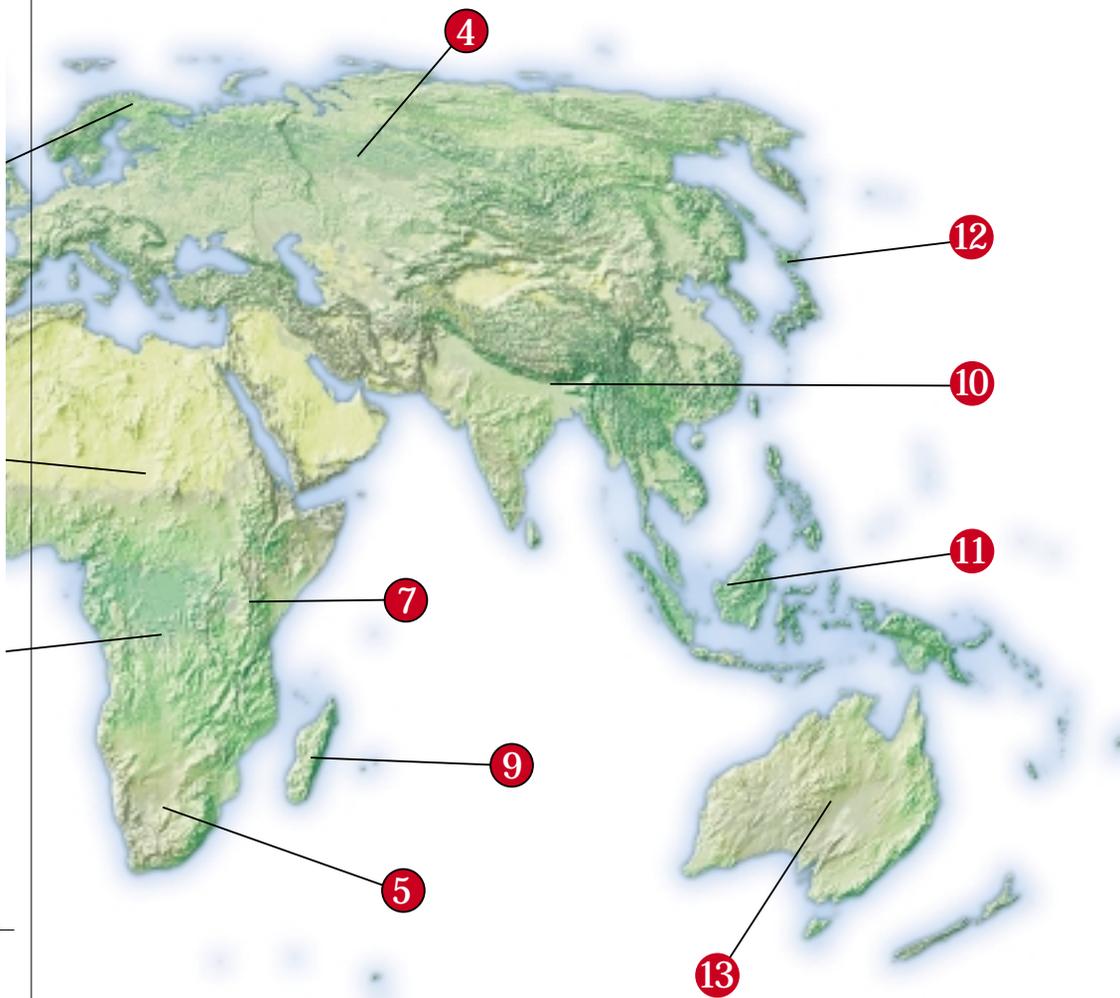
contaminated much of their land and water and hydroelectricity projects interfere with reindeer migrations. The Saami Institute, which receives support from the Norwegian, Swedish and Finnish governments, is fighting for Saami control of local resources.

**4** **Siberian Russia** is home to about 200,000 hunting, trapping and fishing peoples in 26 ethnic groups spread out over an enormous area. The **Nenet** and **Khanty** peoples live on the **Yamal Peninsula** of northwest Siberia, well above the Arctic Circle. For about 1,000 years, they lived nomadically with reindeer herds, while also fishing in tundra rivers and lakes. In the early 20th century, some families had amassed herds of several hundred reindeer. Communist collectivisation in the 1930s severely disrupted the traditional system, which ironically was based on the sharing of all resources within clan structures, and now huge natural-gas

projects are destroying the environment. The Yamal area peoples are fighting a seemingly losing battle against the state to save their culture and land.

## Africa

**5** In **Southern Africa** there are about 100,000 people whom anthropologists classify as hunter-gatherers; these are divided into seven groups. Ten per cent of them continue to practise hunting and gathering in some way. Among these are the **!Kung**, more correctly known as the **Ju'/'oansi**, from the Dobe area of **Botswana**. These bushman, or **San**, lived entirely on wild foods and materials until Bantu farmers migrated into their territories, bringing grain, livestock and iron with them. These new foods and technologies stimulated trade and social ties between the bushmen and Bantu, which resulted in varying degrees of cultural adaptation of the bushmen depending on proximity to their agricultural neighbours.



**6** There are roughly 137,000 hunter-gatherers, who live in 12 groups in **Central Africa**. Pygmy groups such as the **Baka** and **Aka** are typically either net or bow-and-arrow hunters and live in close cooperation with agricultural neighbours. Almost three quarters of Central Africa's hunter-gatherers maintain their traditional lifestyles, although in all cases there has been some kind of adaptation of culture. Some anthropologists believe that people could not live in tropical forests without agriculture and that the ties between pygmies and agriculturalists stem from the forest peoples' need for carbohydrates. Today, the semi-nomadic pygmies are employed by villagers to hunt the wild animals needed to supply the burgeoning bush-meat trade.

**7** In **East Africa** around 7,000 hunter-gatherers continue to live in a traditional manner with a moderate amount of cultural change. The **Aweer** of

**Kenya** have several different types of arrowheads, each used for a specific game animal. They depend heavily on the fruit of the wild cycad for starch in the diet. This is just over ten per cent of the nominal total of hunters in East Africa. The rest – including the largest group, the **Ogiek** – have been forced into sedentary lifestyles based around farming or waged work.

**8** The **Sahel** region is home to only one group of hunter-gatherers. The **Haddad** of **Chad** number only 500; 300 of these maintain traditional lifestyles in some way, although most of their culture has been replaced by that of the majority. Some live in tents and camp with Kreda pastoralists, hunting gazelle and antelope with nets, while others live in beehive huts, grow millet and hunt with bows and arrows wearing animal masks.

**9** Eighty per cent of the 1,000 members of the **Mikea** tribe, the

only group of hunter-gatherers in **Madagascar**, practise the lifestyle of their ancestors in varying degrees. The largest animal they hunt is the bush pig, an immigrant from mainland Africa, using spears and dogs. The most common prey are tenrecs (small hedgehog-like animals) and lemurs, both unique to the Great Red Island. The former they club to death, while the latter are usually hunted with blowpipes and darts, a legacy of Madagascar's Indonesian immigrants.

### Asia

**10** **South Asia**, mainly **India**, has up to 280,000 people who depend on forest resources. Between 10,000 and 20,000 of these live as semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers while the rest are settled and grow crops or are labourers, hunting and gathering when they can. Trade in forest products is well organised in south Asia and the collectors either sell to government agents or take the

products to weekly *haats*, or rural markets. Many of the well-known **Vedda** of **Sri Lanka** now make a living from tourists who pay to visit 'traditional' settlements of the 'Stone Age' people who dress in loin cloths instead of their usual trousers and T-shirts. The only forager group in **Nepal** are the **Raute**, who hunt mainly monkeys.

**11** Most of the remaining 30,000–35,000 hunters in **Southeast Asia** are small and dark skinned, the remainder of a once widespread Negrito population that originated in Africa. Many, such as the **Batak** and **Agta** of the **Philippines** and **Semang** of **Malaysia**, have mixed with local people. Others are descended from today's majority populations who came from mainland Asia, for example the **Penan** of **Borneo**, **Tasaday** and **Tau'Bat** of the **Philippines** and **Mlabri** of **Thailand**. Only 2,000–3,000 have not abandoned hunting and gathering for agriculture or other pursuits.

**12** The 65,000 **Ainu** of **Japan** are the aboriginal population of the northern island of **Hokkaido**. They used to hunt deer and bears and fish for salmon, but today the government has severely limited the number of fish they can catch annually. They make a great effort to preserve their traditions, which are organised around cultural centres. The **Matagi** are a small, little-known group living on islands in the Sea of Japan who trap wild animals and fish.

### Australia

**13** All native **Australians** were hunter-gatherers at the time of European contact in the 18th century. However, today fewer than 5,000 out of the approximately 240,000 **Aboriginals** still hunt and gather to any significant degree. Until 1992 they had no legal claim to their traditional territories as their land was classified by law as 'empty land'. The Mabo case terminated this distinction, and several Aboriginal groups have since won court cases granting them surface – but not mineral – rights based on traditional occupation. 