

# HUNTER-GATHERERS, CONSERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT: FROM PREJUDICE TO POLICY REFORM

**Roger Blench**

‘But lo! men have become the tools of their tools. The man who independently plucked the fruits when he was hungry is become a farmer; and he who stood under a tree for shelter, a housekeeper. We now no longer camp as for a night, but have settled down on earth and forgotten heaven.’  
Henry David Thoreau, Walden, 1847

*Communities of present-day or former hunter-gatherers live in scattered communities across the world, although their precise numbers and status are very uncertain. Their often marginalised status and ethnolinguistic diversity has made it hard to articulate their case for land rights outside Australia and North America. Their preferred subsistence strategy, hunting, is often in direct conflict with conservation philosophies and protected areas often fall within their traditional hunting areas. This paper reviews their present situation and discusses some of the proposed strategies for incorporating them into more conventional natural resource management strategies.*

## **Policy conclusions**

- Hunter-gatherer or foraging peoples dominated much of the world until recently, but the last few centuries have seen them marginalised almost everywhere. The rapid spread of both agriculture and livestock production has seen their traditional lands alienated and their main sources of subsistence decimated. However, just as there is an increasing realisation that pastoral peoples are efficient users of marginal environments and need to be protected from encroachment by outside interests, it is becoming apparent that foragers need similar assistance.
- Since the 1970s, these communities have begun to fight back, especially in the area of land rights. The establishment by Canada on 1st April, 1999 of Nunavut, a self-governing territory for the Inuit the size of western Europe, represents a major political and economic breakthrough for foragers. Elsewhere, notably in Africa, India, SE Asia and Siberia, rights and access to land continue to be eroded.
- Development agencies have a poor record of interest in foragers, partly because their preferred way of life is so much at odds with conventional development strategies. However, the recent prioritisation of poverty and marginalised peoples has refocused attention towards them, without however, any corresponding policy development.
- In principle, foragers and conservationists ought to cooperate since both have a strong interest in habitat preservation and sustainable harvesting of wild resources. In practice the two groups have often found themselves in opposition. Effective progress will be made towards more appropriate systems of access and land rights if better ways for these two groups can work together.

## **Introduction**

Introduction The establishment on the 1st of April, 1999 of Nunavut, a self-governing territory for the Inuit people of north-west Canada somewhat larger than western Europe, represents a major victory for foraging people in a world where the current political climate is generally adverse. In contrast, the San of the Central Kalahari Reserve in Botswana have been the subject of long-term pressure to leave so that the area can be developed for tourism and because their supposedly 'Stone Age' existence is a subject of embarrassment. The Botswana government has recently threatened to cut off all water supplies in order to compel them to leave (Currington, 1999).

Hunter-gatherers or foragers do not feature prominently in development literature; a poignant argument for supposing that the historical schemas of Marxism continue to play an important role in informing development ideology. Hunter-gatherers' persistent adherence to a way of life that is alien, is an implicit affront to the elaborate edifice of the developed world's science. Anthropologists, on the other hand, have always reserved a fascination for such people for precisely that reason; hunter-gatherers seem to have retained elements of social and economic organisation common to humanity for thousands of years but now almost vanished.

Foragers have qualities that make them unsuitable for conventional development. They only exist in small groups and tend to display exceptional ethnolinguistic diversity, making communication difficult. Their subsistence strategies are also highly diverse; there may be little commonality between circumpolar hunters of sea-mammals and foragers in the tropical forests. They eat as much meat as they can, often disposing of now-endangered mammals in a bloody manner. They are usually despised by the neighbouring farming or pastoral peoples, who frequently refuse to intermarry with them. As a result they tend to have less access to schools, clinics, roads and other modern infrastructure, and to be less able to organise and articulate their needs.

Hunter-gatherers have another paradoxical quality that puts them in an excluded category; their archetypal representation as guardians of environmental lore. They are seen as having an exceptional knowledge of their surroundings which puts them in harmony with nature and makes them repositories of herbal lore or animal behaviour. This very specific link to their immediate environment makes them less susceptible to the laws of agricultural economics usually deemed to order the rural world. Since foragers are few in number and inconveniently remote they are generally ignored or seen as a case for humanitarian aid.

The irony however, is that hunter-gatherers play an exceptional role in the romantic imagination of the developed world. Every bookshop of any size in North America has shelves of literature, on, about, by or purportedly by, native Americans; fashionable New York matrons have adopted 'smudging' to establish the appropriate arrangement of their interior designs. Museums across Australia now fête the knowledge and environmental skills of the Aborigines, as white gallery-owners count the profits from selling their paintings. CDs of music 'borrowing' from the distinctive hocket-techniques of the equatorial rainforest pygmies can be bought everywhere. More grotesquely, some

southern African Bushman have been pressed into making a living by presenting theme-park versions of themselves following their expulsion from their home region in the Kalahari Gemsbok Reserve during the apartheid era. Neo-shamans head to Siberia to learn from and help re-invent the fragments that survived the Soviet era repressions.

Hardly any of this affects the people on the ground; their state remains as dismal as ever. Indeed the paradox is that their beneficent image in theory can absolve government from taking action in practice. Note also, that the sample is very selective. Hunter-gatherers of India, insular SE Asia and Somalia remain virtually unknown to the external world, while nomadic fishing peoples, or the sago-gatherers of lowland Irian Jaya are evidently not sufficiently photogenic to make it to the colour supplements.

If however, our concern is with people at the bottom of the heap, whose land is being progressively removed, (often by development projects), who are being forced to conform to the behavioural and cultural norms of the nation-state for no other reason than they are visible dissenters, then perhaps we should take hunter-gatherers more seriously. And of course, the mystics are not entirely wrong; such people do have more to teach us than we can easily learn. This paper looks at the status of hunter-gatherers in the world today and asks how we can understand their sometimes perplexing aspirations and harmonise them with both the need to conserve wildlife and the requirements of ever-expanding farming populations.

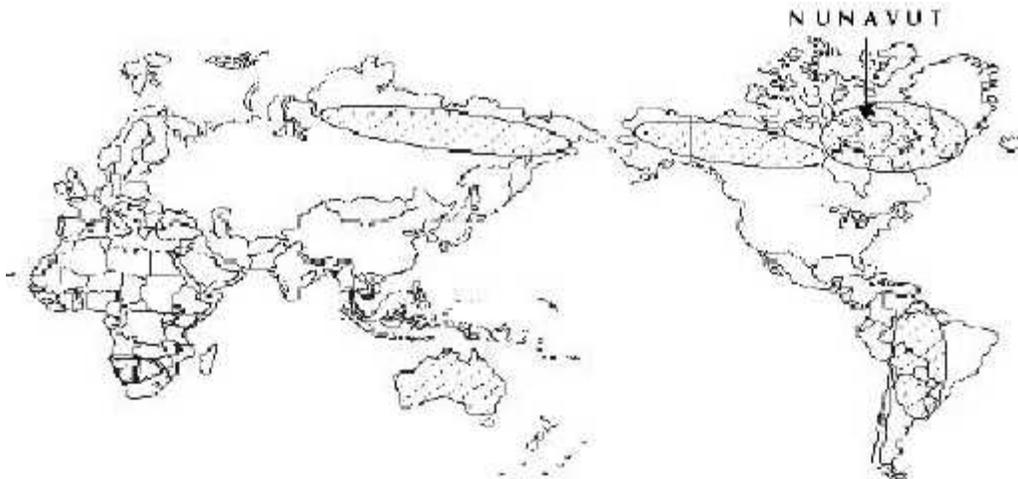
### **Foraging peoples today**

Foragers inhabiting some mythical vacuum free from contact with forces of globalisation do not exist; in every part of the world they have been forced to make accommodation with pastoralists, cultivators, industrial society or nature conservancy. Nowhere is this more visible than in Australia and the New World, continents dominated by foragers prior to European contact, where hunting and gathering can only exist in gaps between the highways, kept alive by advocacy groups. It is here, paradoxically, that hunter-gatherers live a life least like their immediate predecessors, and yet have been most successful in obtaining land rights and compensation for the dispossession of their forebears.

In most regions of the world, foragers are enclaved, and exploit fragments of land between encroaching pastoral and agricultural peoples. Even where national governments have sympathy for pastoralists, they have little or none for hunter-gatherers, and certainly do not respect their land rights. Table 1 presents a synopsis of foragers in the world today, with notes on their status. Map 1 shows generalised locations of hunter-gatherer populations. Numbers of hunter-gatherers worldwide are extremely difficult to estimate both because of the ambivalent status of recently 'settled' groups, and because few developing countries wish to acknowledge their presence. Many national governments such as those of India and Malaysia, regard foragers or tribal peoples in general as indicators of backwardness and forbid research relating to them. As a result, reliable recent data is often difficult to obtain. It is probably only in Irian Jaya, where sago-gathering and fishing-based cultures persist in swampy areas, unsuitable for permanent

settlement and only manageable for populations with a genetic heritage allowing them to resist malaria and other humidity-related diseases, that foraging is not yet under pressure.

**Map 1 Schematic map of world-wide hunter-gatherer populations**



**Table 1 Present-day hunter-gatherers**

Region	Status
Africa	Almost all confined to eastern and southern Africa and the central African rainforest. Twa groups exist in client relationships with adjacent farmers. Warfare in both central Africa and Angola has had a major impact on Twa and Khoisan.
Australia	Historically >250 distinct ethnolinguistic groups, but in rapid decline with hardly any individuals still practising classic foraging. Land rights movements has been extremely successful.
India	Numerous groups, poorly known due to research restrictions, but severely oppressed in many areas and traditional lands continue to be eroded by pioneer agriculture. Andamanese and Nicobarese foragers have almost disappeared.
SE Asia	Poorly known, but scattered groups of inland foragers throughout the Malaysian peninsular, in the Philippines and perhaps in Laos. Nomadic fishing-peoples exist in an arc between Burma and Sulawesi.
Oceania	Sago and fishing-based cultures remain largely intact in Irian Jaya.
Siberia	Relatively few groups, well-studied. Some reverting to foraging in the

North America	Numerous groups in catastrophic decline from the nineteenth century and still disappearing. Larger groups now with well-established land rights advocacy. Hunting practised within regulated frameworks.
South America	Numerous groups in decline but some so remote that they are still being recorded for the first time. National policies or failure to enforce regulations make their situation very precarious in some countries. Armed

### Reasons for concern

Historically, forager cultures have proved the most vulnerable to aggression from agricultural and technology-based cultures – ‘guns, germs and steel’ – against dispersed low-technology populations (Diamond, 1997). The decline of the Australian and Amerindian peoples following European intrusion is a familiar story, outright violence replaced by degradation and cultural assimilation. Some of the grimmest narratives of cultural and literal genocide relate to foragers. However, it is less well-known that this story is repeating itself in other continents at present, with ‘settlement’ and ‘assimilation’ being the main goals. The irony is, of course, that these initiatives are presented as positive assistance, instead of simply being a way to eliminate an administrative incongruity. But the reality is that such schemes almost always end up further disadvantaging the communities they may be intended to help. By concentrating a formerly dispersed group in one centre, they facilitate the spread of disease. Foraging societies’ cultures are oriented around small groups, movement, and a close acquaintance with their environment. Settlement around a focal point at a stroke eliminates all these elements and introduces the largely unfamiliar elements of agriculture and increasingly tourism.

### Box 1 Trying to help the Hadza

The Hadza are one of the best-known hunter-gatherer peoples of Africa. Living in northern Tanzania, speaking a language not known to be related to any other in the world and remaining resistant to settlement; they have attracted the attention of ethnographers, physical anthropologists, linguists and rights activists. During the colonial era there were two attempts to settle them, both of which ended with measles epidemics and high mortality. The Hadza became a subject of some embarrassment to the post-colonial government of Tanzania and further efforts at sedentarisation involving armed police were made in 1964 and 1980. Meanwhile, land encroachment on their traditional hunting territories has proceeded apace, encouraged by government land registration policies and agriculture, both small-scale cash-cropping and Canadian government-sponsored large-scale wheat production. At the same time, wildlife resources have been depleted to unsustainable levels by urban hunters. There have also been NGO efforts to help the Hadza, based around clinics and schooling, but these have been rapidly diverted to the

dominant political groups in the area, the Iraqw and Datooga.

*Source:* James Woodburn, pers. comm.

### **Foragers and pastoralists**

Foragers and pastoralists often live in overlapping territories, especially in Africa and Siberia. Prior to the twentieth century, land competition was not of major significance and these two interlocking subsistence strategies could effectively coexist. However, as human population densities have increased and pastoral habitats converted, pastoralists are under pressure to define their territories. In Siberia, the system of simply managing wild reindeer, was transformed under the Soviet regime into a system of herding within bounded and fenced territories, thereby excluding such hunting peoples as the Nenets. The Nenets were supposedly settled, although it has recently emerged that many fled into extremely remote areas. In Botswana and Namibia, cattle-keepers such as the Kgalagadi, Herero and Ovimbundu have themselves faced exclusion from white-owned fenced ranches and have been pushed into further incursions on the hunting territories of the Khoisan. At the same time, the establishment of game fences, intended to exclude migratory herds of wild animals and thereby keep livestock disease-free, reduced the ability of hunters to follow game, especially across national boundaries.

One of the options that foragers often take when faced with pressure from outside forces to cease hunting is to work with livestock. The Navajo have become well-known sheep-herders and native Australians frequently work as stockmen. The Khoikhoi of southern Africa were partly herders at first European contact, but also engaged in extensive foraging. The impact of European settlement was grim and one of the few locations where their society survived, in altered form, was in Namaqualand, in the arid regions in the extreme north-west of South Africa and adjacent to Namibia. Reserves were created and managed on a communal tenure system. However, in the early 1970s, a new proposal was made to create the Richtersveld National Park, effectively sequestering 80,000 hectares from the Nama (Boonzaier et al., 1996). This reflected as much the extreme political marginalisation of the Nama as any protection of the minimal wildlife resources of the region. However, in a reversal of the usual course of events, advocacy groups joined with the Nama to protest the proposed exclusion. The effect was to halt the park creation until the end of the 1980s when grazing and foraging rights were conceded (or compensation paid for their loss) and employment as rangers was offered as a priority to Nama.

### **Box 2 The Andaman Islanders**

The Andaman Islands, off Burma, are politically part of India. The inhabitants, Negrito populations physically distinct from any others in the regions, speak mutually incomprehensible languages. As hunter-gatherers, they depend entirely on foraging, particularly of marine resources. The major impact on their society began early in the

colonial annexation of India, when the largest island, Great Andaman, was turned into a penal colony. This ended with the colonial regime, but virtually uncontrolled migration from Bengal was then permitted with very similar results. A combination of disease, habitat destruction and forced marriages diluted and finally eliminated the Great Andamanese. Similar processes are at work on Little Andaman where less than a hundred of the indigenous population survive in a remaining patch of forest. Small populations of Andamanese survive on two other islands, including the Sentinelese, who have violently resisted sporadic Indian government attempts to attract them with gifts of cloth and bangles, a wise strategy in the light of events on the other Andamans. The Indian government refuses all requests for outsiders to conduct research with the Andamanese. At the same time, a Marine Protected Area (MPA) has been declared in the Andamans, to protect, amongst other fauna, the dugong populations, originally sacred to some groups of Andamanese. However, no attempt to involve the remaining Andamanese in the management of the MPA has been made and unless there is a radical policy shift, their future appears to be very uncertain.

### **Hunters, reserved areas and biodiversity**

The most grievous paradox of supporting hunter-gatherers' rights is that these often appear to conflict directly with the urge to establish protected areas for wildlife and to conserve biodiversity. In the period before high-powered rifles and harpoons were available, the impact on wildlife numbers of traditional hunting methods was relatively minor and some accommodation could be reached. But as hunting technology improves and animal numbers decline, the right to hunt becomes a valuable resource, subject to legislative and economic restrictions. This has been the source of much controversy in the Canadian Arctic, where the Inuit people have been given rights over the wildlife in their area, including otherwise protected species such as whales and polar bears. Using traditional hunting techniques was arduous and time-consuming and the impact on mammal populations was low, and hence sustainable. However, with access to modern technology, excessive numbers of animals can be killed and it has been a subject of much controversy with animal rights and environmental groups as to whether this type of local control over resources is not defeating its own object.

### **What can be done?**

A dismal history of discrimination and marginalisation has generally characterised relations between settled agricultural societies and all mobile groups, 'foragers, fishers, pastoralists and peripatetics' (Rao and Casimir, 1982). The greater numbers of pastoralists and the greater value of the economic resource they control has stimulated a better understanding of their way of life and with it greater sympathy for their migratory production system. Hunter-gatherers have been, and continue to be, the victims of much more intense discrimination and remain some of the most vulnerable groups anywhere. At the same time, without subscribing to the romantic fictions of archetypical guardians of nature, their rich knowledge of the environment remains to be explored.

Hunter-gatherers are entitled to some minimal social justice; since it is apparently perfectly acceptable for communities to derive income from the sale of licenses to shoot

wildlife in programmes such as CAMPFIRE in Zimbabwe, it should be equally acceptable for people who live by hunting and gathering to continue to do so, if they so wish, given their relatively small numbers. Given the important resource information they should accumulate during subsistence activities, there is considerable potential to incorporate their lifestyle into broader conservation strategies, both by providing more accurate information on movements and frequency of wildlife and as a check on poaching activities. Such a legalised impact on overall wildland resources would be so minor compared with the uncontrolled impact of poaching and habitat conversion that it would be a price well worth paying.

Such a solution is only practicable where wildlife is still a resource; in many cases, foragers have been marginalised precisely because it is no longer a significant factor in the ecology of the area. If so, other solutions must be found and it should be recognised that:

- Foragers, by the nature of their society, will not easily form articulate advocacy groups without external assistance. However, without such groups, their rights will be eroded rapidly in many places.
- Their ability to link up with external groups is very much a function of the overall transparency of government policy. Where government blocks access to foragers, an information vacuum is created and advocacy groups find it difficult to generate motivation. The initial problem of development and rights-based agencies is to create a climate of transparency.
- Hunter-gatherers, more than other groups, risk becoming the object of sometimes tasteless cultural tourism, often simultaneously having their land rights expropriated.

Hunter-gatherers represent the paradox of societies whose traditional knowledge is highly valued, but whose actual rights to pursue their traditional subsistence strategies are everywhere either threatened or have been eliminated. They are seen mostly as a case for emergency assistance and very few attempts have been made either to design development projects appropriate to their skills or to explore how their land rights can be integrated into systems of pastoral wildlife management. To remedy this, the key issues are:

- Increased understanding of traditional systems of resource rights.
- Collaborative projects of resource assessment in protected areas making use of the skills and knowledge of hunter-gatherers.
- The development of legal and institutional structures that prevent encroachment from pastoralists and farmers.
- Improved social and economic access through institutions appropriate to forager society.

## **References**

Boonzaier, E., Malherbe, C. Bernes, P. and Smith, A. (1996) *The Cape herders. A history of the Khoikhoi of southern Africa*. Cape Town: David Philip/Athens: Ohio University

Press. Currington, M. (1999) 'On the trail of the Bushmen'. *Geographical*. pp.12–19, Vol.71, No.2. Diamond, J. M. (1997) *Guns, germs and steel: A short history of everybody for the last 13,000 years*. London: Jonathan Cape. Rao, A. and Casimir, M. J. (1982) 'Mobile pastoralists of Jammu and Kashmir: A preliminary report'.

### **Electronic sources**