

The Original Affluent Society

What is the physical health and well-being of those who crave the stone for Sedna and dance to Karora, those who painted images in Les Trois Freres and re-tell of Burnt Face? What is the quality of life in Indigenous gatherer-hunter communities, for those living in ancient times as well as the more recent? The social philosopher Thomas Hobbes in his *Leviathan* (1651) had characterized it as a life with "no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

Archaeological and ethnographic studies over the last thirty years have re-written our images of the gatherer-hunter Dream Animal of the past and the contemporary, and have helped dispel many commonly held stereotypes. Certainly variations occur and exceptions abound, but a coherent imagery is emerging. What, indeed, is the quality of life in gatherer-hunter society?

Let me offer a brief comparison of the differing levels of resources needed to sustain gatherer-hunter and Euro-American societies.¹ The comparison will focus on the daily consumption of energy per capita in each of six types of societies and will be measured in terms of equivalent kilocalories. A kilocalorie is a unit of energy that is equal to 1,000 grams of calories. It takes one kilocalorie to heat a kilogram of water one degree centigrade.

In Paleolithic gatherer-hunter society, from 2.6 million to 10,000 years ago, representing about 99% of human history, the primary source of energy is derived from the food stuffs that are individually consumed and is the equivalent to approximately **2,000** kilocalories needed per day per capita to maintain this life-style.

In historic and contemporary gatherer-hunter society, energy is derived from food consumed and from firewood used for heating and cooking. The equivalent of **5,000** kilocalories are needed daily per capita (2,000 kilo. food energy and 3,000 kilo. firewood energy) to maintain this ecological life-style.

In horticultural society, beginning about 10,000 years ago, domesticated plants harvested by hand from gardens supplanted the gathering of wild plants. Domesticated animals also contribute to the energy source. The equivalent of **12,000** kilocalories are required (4,000 kilo. food, 4,000 kilo. firewood and 4,000 kilo. domesticated animals) to maintain this ecological life-style.

In agricultural society, the plow, draft animal and field replace the garden and the hoe. Coal is often used as a fuel source along with wind and/or water. Transportation is aided by animals. The equivalent of **26,000** kilocalories are needed daily (7,000 kilo. food, 6,000 kilo.

¹See Cook 1971.

firewood, 12,000 kilo. domesticated animal and 1,000 kilo. coal) to maintain this ecological life-style.

In industrial society, beginning around the 1760s, the steam and gas engine are the backbone of energy production and consumption. The equivalent of **77,000** kilocalories are required per capita per day (24,000 kilo. food, 7,000 kilo. firewood, 32,000 kilo. domesticated animals, and 14,000 kilo. coal) to maintain this ecological life-style.

In contemporary technological society of the 21st Century, electricity via coal, natural gas, water and nuclear energy resources is the cornerstone of energy production and consumption. The equivalent of from **280,000 to 323,000** kilocalories are needed per individual each day (91,000 kilo. food, 10,000 kilo. firewood, 33,000 kilo. domesticated animals, 83,000 kilo. coal/natural gas and 63,000 kilo. electricity) to maintain this ecological life-style.

Our Euro-American society is comprised of elements of both the industrial and technological societal orientations. The comparison of a contemporary gatherer-hunter **5,000** kilocalorie consumption level with an industrial-technological **77,000-323,000** kilocalorie consumption level offers a most remarkable contrast.

It is often perceived that with the advent of technological society there has been a significant reduction in the number of hours of human labor needed for production and an increase in leisure time. This perception is not the case. The amount of work output directed at food gathering, preparation and related subsistence activities in gatherer-hunter society is typically the equivalent of **20-25** hours per week. Much more time is engaged in ritual, social and recreational activities. There is, in fact, far greater leisure time in gatherer-hunter societies than there is in our own industrial society. In technological society, a 40-hour work week has become necessary for minimal subsistence. Three weeks of vacation plus holidays is a norm. With all the labor-saving appliances, the urban American homemaker puts in an average of 55 hours per week in household-related activities. In the 1920s, without the benefits of these devices, an average of 52 hours of housework was expended. Even the medieval serf of Europe had 115 days off for festivals.

The quality of gatherer-hunter diet is also most revealing.² With societal exceptions such as the Eskimo, wild plant foods typically account for 60-70% of the diet. Because of the gender role dichotomy of "man the hunter" and "woman the gatherer," women actually contributed more food stuffs to the family than did their counterparts, though often without receiving the glory and recognition. This ratio of a 30-40% meat contribution thus existed throughout a million-year history of humanity. The ratio was only altered with the

²See Eaton and Konner 1985 for a discussion on paleolithic diet, and Lee 1968 and Sahlins 1972 for a discussion of historic and contemporary gatherer-hunter diet.

domestication of plants and reliance on various crop foods. Meat consumption was thereafter significantly reduced. Then came the modern American diet, with the introduction of a newly constituted meat form, rich in fats.

For the historic and contemporary gatherer-hunter, typically **2,150** calories are consumed daily. In the paleolithic diet, an estimated **3,000** calories were consumed on a daily basis. These levels of calorie consumption are comparable with the United States Department of Agriculture recommended minimum of 1,975 calories.

In gatherer-hunter society protein amounts around **90** grams per day are achieved while the paleolithic diet was at **250** grams. These levels are comparable or exceed the actual U.S. average consumption which ranges from 50-125 grams. Of interest, early *Homo sapiens* and *Neanderthals* of 75,000 years ago averaged 6 inches taller than agricultural peoples of 8,000 years ago, and remained so up to a 100 years ago. Today, we are now as tall as we once were.

Paleolithic fat consumption was at **71** grams per day (30 g. animal and 41 g. plant), representing 21% of the total daily dietary energy source. The U.S. average consumption represents 42% of the diet, with 30% a U.S.D.A. recommended. A significant portion of the U.S. fat consumption is of saturated fats.

Sodium levels in the paleolithic diet were at **690** milligrams, compared with the U.S. average consumption of 2,300-6,900 mg. per day.

Calcium intake levels in the paleolithic were at **1,580** milligrams, compared with an average 740 mg. per day in the U.S. Of note, this calcium level was reached without dairy products, e.g., cheese or milk, but was a result of the way animal foods are prepared and consumed, i.e., inclusion of animal bone.

Remarkably, ascorbic acid was at **392** milligrams per day, compared with an average U.S. consumption of 88 mg.

Paleolithic fiber intake was at **46** grams per day, compared with an average U.S. of 20 grams.

As with the quality of the diet, the quality of historic and contemporary gatherer-hunter health is rather revealing. Typically, there are fewer diseases compared with industrial society. Prior to European contact, there was no diabetes, no stroke or heart disease, most varieties of cancer were absent, no hypertension or senility. There was also an absence of many of the infectious diseases characteristic of industrial society. There were higher infant mortality rates, however. But if infancy was survived, over 10% of the population lived over 60 years, which is comparable to many industrial societies.

Given the social equality and the kinship sharing characteristic of gatherer-hunter society, hunger is not "institutionalized." Gatherer-hunter society is typically an equalitarian society. No group and seldom an individual goes without, unless a local disaster causes all to

go without. Poverty, a creation of class distinction and an unequal distribution of resources, is to be found in agricultural and industrial societies.

Keep in mind that the gatherer-hunter orientation has represented over ninety-nine percent of all of Dream Animal history. Plant and animal domestication and our technologically-oriented society is a relatively new experiment in the human experience. Also keep in mind that the quality of diet and health found among gatherer-hunter peoples is achieved with relatively minimal resource demands and a "simple" technology. It is a technology that provides an efficient means of utilizing the available resources.

An argument can be made, as Marshal Sahlins has made, that there is affluence in gatherer-hunter society, the "original affluent society."³ I would suggest that the affluence is, in fact, greater than that found in industrial society. Such is the case if affluence is a measure of the ratio of the means and products available, i.e., the technological knowledge and goods produced, relative to the desired wants, i.e., the expectations. We are, of course, speaking of the material affluence relating to food, health and physical comfort. In gatherer-hunter society, we find that the material expectations of the people closely match their means to obtain those expectations. What people desire is obtained. It is acknowledged that what is desired in gatherer-hunter society may not be even remotely similar to that desired in industrial society. Nevertheless, in gatherer-hunter society, the desires of food, health and physical comfort are fundamentally secured. What is not as easily obtainable are desires relating to social, aesthetic and spiritual fulfillment. Here the quests continue. In contrast, the quest for material affluence has become a driving force in industrial society; while the quests for social, aesthetic and spiritual fulfillments continue but are apparently less overtly emphasized. All things considered, given the quality of diet and of health, and the relative affluence, life in gatherer-hunter society is anything but "nasty, brutish and short."⁴

³See Sahlins 1972.

⁴These comments are not presented to suggest a call for a "return to the primitive." We must avoid romanticizing the gatherer-hunter as our "noble savage." After all, the gatherer-hunter seldom has had an opportunity to "tax" the "carrying capacity" of their lands. Their "simple" technology more than met their physical needs and expectations. By comparison, the vastly expanded population of our contemporary world necessitates a resource base and technological infrastructure of a magnitude incomprehensible to the gatherer-hunter.