Hunting and Gathering

Early people lived very close to the land. They used what they could find around them for food. One way to get food was to gather it by collecting plants, roots, nuts, and berries. Another way was to hunt for it by killing animals such as deer, bison, and antelope. Most early people used both methods of getting food. That is why they are called hunters and gatherers.

Hunting and gathering was a way of life for all early people. Another name for a people’s way of life is culture. A culture includes the kinds of tools people make and the foods they eat. Culture also includes the language people speak, how they teach their children, and the way they view the world. A culture includes every part of a people’s life.

Groups on the Move

Scientists believe that all hunters and gatherers lived in family groups. Often the family group included not only parents and their young children but also grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Sometimes several families joined together. However, few groups had more than 50 people. Groups had to be small because hunters and gatherers were usually on the move. They traveled from place to place in search of food.

Hunters and gatherers did not roam around aimlessly. A group usually stayed in one general area. Its movements within that area were not aimless either. In summer, for example, a group might camp in lowlands to be near a good supply of berries. Then, in autumn, they might move to higher ground where they could harvest wild grain.

Shelter too depended on the seasons. Many groups lived in caves during the cold months of the year. Then, in summer, they might set up tents made from the bones and hides of animals they had killed. Or they might camp in the open.

A group on the move rarely met other groups. So they had little chance to trade goods. Hunters and gatherers could not buy the things they needed. Each group had to be self-sufficient. Members of the group provided everything the group needed to survive.
Working Together

The survival of the group depended on the work and ideas of every member. Hunting, for example, was a group activity. A group might dig a pit below a cliff to trap a large animal. Then members of the group would use fire to force the animal over the cliff into the waiting pit.

Some groups circled around game, using branches and leaves to hide themselves. Next the hunters would throw their spears at the trapped animal. Once the animal was dead, the group had to move in and take its meat before other animals smelled a kill. Once again teamwork was important.

Gathering berries or digging roots seems at first less dangerous. However, many wild plants are poisonous. Others are safe only when cooked. Since one mistake could mean death for the entire group, gathering food was a job in which everyone’s knowledge was important.

To trap wild animals and to dig up roots, people needed tools. The making of tools was still another task that a group shared. The earliest tools were probably no more than stones or sticks. These could be thrown at an animal or used to chop or dig.

Slowly people learned how to improve their tools by using one rock to chip away another. A tool made in this way had a sharper point and was better for digging. Often such a sharp rock was tied to the end of a stick to make a spear. These spears gave early hunters a better hunting weapon than any they had known before. The spears were used not only to hunt animals but also to catch fish.
Values and Beliefs
Most scientists think that very early hunters and gatherers had little trouble finding food. A group may have spent only two or three hours a day searching for food. This left plenty of time to tell stories, talk with friends, and share ideas.

When hunters and gatherers gathered around the campfire, they probably wondered at the world around them. They probably tried to figure out how they fit into that world. Archeologists have found evidence that suggests these early people had religious beliefs.

Many early people seem to have believed in life after death. Graves uncovered both in Asia and in Europe show that the dead were buried carefully. Often they were dressed in clothing made of skin and fur. They wore the jewelry they had used as decoration when they were alive. Their tools were also buried with them. Thus these early people seemed ready to continue life even after death.

To Help You Remember
1. How did early people get food?
2. (a) What is a culture? (b) What does a culture include?
3. (a) How large was a group of early hunters and gatherers? (b) Why were groups this size?
4. Name two ways the seasons affected hunters and gatherers.
5. (a) Name three activities early hunters and gatherers did as a group. (b) Why did early people work together?
6. (a) Name a religious belief early people had. (b) How do archeologists know about this belief?