



Animal Resources Used by Prehistoric Peoples of the Upper Mississippi

The First Humans

The first people to live in the region now known as Iowa and Wisconsin came into the area somewhere between 10,000 and 12,000 BC, at the end of the last Ice Age. These people are known to us as Paleo-Indians and were nomadic hunters. The Paleo-Indians followed and hunted mammoth, mastodon and other large animals that are now extinct, using

them to meet their needs for food, clothing and bone tools.

As the mammoths and other megafauna became scarcer and many finally disappeared altogether, other resources became more important to the people living here.

Hunter/Gatherers

With the decline of the herds of mammoth and other megafauna, a change in lifestyle to a less nomadic hunter/gatherer culture developed. Hunting was still an important method for obtaining food and other materials, but was increasingly supplemented with plant resources. With this changing lifestyle, new cultures known as the Archaic, and the Woodland evolved. With resources available from wildlife, the river, the forests and prairies, the minerals and through trading, a wide variety of materials were available for their use.

Our knowledge of the uses for animal resources comes mainly from examining the trash left behind by early people at their campsites. At summer camp locations, trash was repeatedly discarded in refuse pits, but most frequently accumulated on the ground surface. These surface accumulations are referred to as middens by archaeologists. During the winter, while the people lived in rockshelters and caves, trash was often tossed to the back of the cave or shelter. By examining the refuse left in these places, archaeologists can determine which animals were being used, what they were being used for, and when.

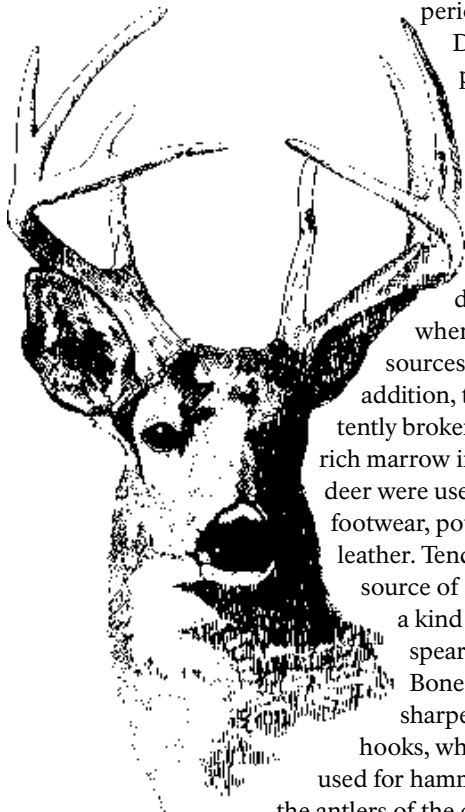
Agriculture

Beginning between 1200 and 1300 AD, a new lifestyle evolved that included agriculture. These last prehistoric people were the Oneota. In addition to the hunting and gathering that had supplied the

earlier prehistoric peoples, cultivation of corn, squash and other crops provided a steady, reliable source of food.

Mammals

The most important animal used from the Archaic time and continuing throughout the prehistoric period is the whitetail deer.



Deer provide a total package of useful materials for food, clothing and tools. Deer remains are most often found at rockshelters, indicating that this was a primary food source during the winter months, when plant and river resources were less available. In addition, the bones were consistently broken open to get to the fat-rich marrow inside. Hides from the deer were used to create clothing, footwear, pouches and strips of leather. Tendons were an important source of sinew, which was used as a kind of stringy glue to fasten spear points to wooden shafts. Bones could be broken and sharpened for use as awls and hooks, while larger bones could be used for hammering or digging. Even the antlers of the deer were an important

tool; the points were used to pressure flake the local chert, a type of flint, into stone tools. While not as frequently found, elk were also hunted and used in the same way as whitetail deer.

Another frequently used animal was the bison, though they were far more common on the west side of the Mississippi River than the east. Bison remains are usually incomplete, with the hoof bones found more often than other bones. This indicates that most of the bones were left at the kill site. A hide and meat bundle was transported back to the campsite with the hooves left on the hide to help move the bundle. Uses for the bison were similar to that of the deer. During the Oneota period, the shoulder blades of the bison were used as hoes. Because of the relative absence of large numbers of bison on the east side of the Mississippi, these shoulder blades, or scapulae, became trade items.

Black bear were found over a wide area, again used for food, clothing and tools. The large canine teeth of the bear were used as a type of jewelry or ornamentation, and were occasionally used as grave offerings. A spiritual connection to the bear is also seen in construction of earthworks in the image of the bear.

The beaver was another useful animal. In addition to the hides, many lower jaws of beaver have been found with the incisors carefully removed--probably for use as woodworking tools.

The only domesticated animal in the area was the dog. In addition to companionship, dogs acted as an alarm

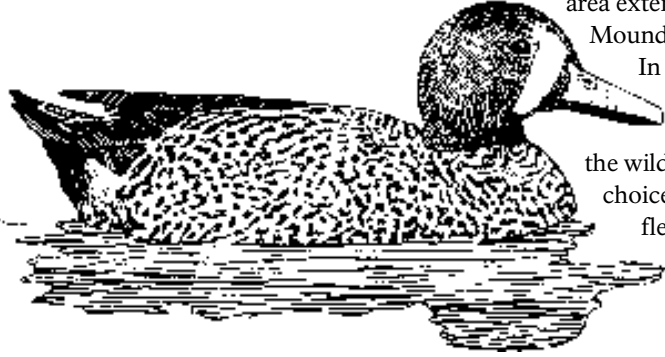
system for the camp, assisted in hunting, disposed of unused food scraps and sometimes were a food source as well.

Remains of at least 44 species of mammals have been found at refuse sites in the Upper Mississippi region.

Birds

The most frequently used bird during the prehistoric era was the wild turkey. This is particularly true in the area extending south from Effigy Mounds National Monument.

In addition to being an important food source, the primary feathers of the wild turkey were the best choice for arrow and spear fletching. These feathers were also used as trade items destined for areas where wild turkeys were not as common.



Waterfowl, including Canada geese, mallards, wood ducks and trumpeter swans, were hunted as a source

of meat. In the spring, the eggs of these birds were also harvested.

The remains of smaller perching birds are seldom found. Charred redwing blackbird bones were an exception, indicating that this species was also used as a food source.

The bones of various birds were useful as needles, awls, and hooks, while the feathers could be used for ornamentation and rituals. The spiritual importance of certain birds is also reflected in their image being fashioned into earthworks, or effigy mounds.

The remains of at least 51 different species of birds have been found in refuse pits and middens throughout the Upper Mississippi region.

Reptiles and Amphibians

Very few reptiles and amphibians were used by the prehistoric people of the area. The main exceptions seem to be the box turtle and, in particular, the snapping turtle. Turtles may have been captured

while laying eggs on dry land. Burned shells from these turtles indicate they were cooked in their shells.

Aquatic Animals

The most commonly found fish used in this region is the catfish--the black bullhead in particular. Some fish, such as suckers and northern pike, were gathered during the spawning periods, while others such as gars, bowfin and bullhead were captured by seining or in traps in shallow backwaters during the summer months. Large catfish of 50 pounds or more were found at many sites along the Upper Mississippi.

Mussels were one of the main sources of food for the local prehistoric inhabitants. In fact, one midden across the river from Effigy Mounds National Monument, near Prairie du Chien, is estimated to contain more than one million mussel shells, indicat-

ing use for many years. Mussels would have been a seasonal food source, being harvested during the warm weather months. In addition to being a food source, mussel shells were also used as tools, and crushed shells were used as a tempering material when making pottery. Occasionally, attractive shells were buried with the dead. Freshwater pearls found inside the mussels were also used as trade items.

Remains of at least 35 species of fish and 39 different species of mussels have been identified at refuse sites in the area.

Present-day Resource Management

The results of excavations at refuse sites demonstrate that prehistoric people of this area lived in a land with a rich diversity of natural resources. Living in harmony with the forests, prairies, and

wetlands, they were able to make good use of these resources and harvested all of the basic needs of life from them. At the time of the first European contact here in the late 17th century, this rich diversity was still intact, despite having been occupied by humans for thousands of years.

During the last 200 years, the forests have been logged, the prairies plowed, and the river dammed, all of which has contributed to the decline and loss of many of the species once found and utilized by the people of this area.

At Effigy Mounds National Monument, the National Park Service is preserving and restoring the land to the conditions found here during the moundbuilding era. As a work in progress, this effort will continue so visitors may walk through the forests and prairies of the park and see a scene reminiscent of and populated by many of same animals seen and used by the inhabitants of this area throughout the ages.

