Was farming an improvement over foraging?

Transport yourself back to about 12,000 years ago, before the advent of agriculture, when humans were still living as foragers. What would your life have been like without domesticated plants and animals? Would you have been healthier or not? What would your diet have been like? Would you have had more or less leisure time?

Agriculture is regularly viewed as a key development in the emergence and rise of early human civilizations. The adoption of agriculture marked a major transition for human societies about 11,000 years ago. It introduced an era marked by the intensification of technology, increased extraction of natural resources, and a massive increase in human population.

Agriculture is the cultivation and domestication of plants and animals to obtain food and other products. These practices were developed independently in several parts of the world over thousands of years. As agricultural technology developed, so did human societies and settlements, eventually allowing for a transition from the hunter-gatherer lifestyles to the sedentary* lifestyle most of us are familiar with today. But was this new lifestyle better than the old one? Was farming an improvement over foraging?

Your job in this investigation is to develop your own ideas about quality of life and apply these ideas to what we know about the lives of hunter-gatherers and agriculturalists. You will be using a variety of different texts and images to compare these contrasting ways of life. Some of the sources you examine will offer very direct opinions. Other sources will require you to think about how they relate to the question. In the end, you will be able to use the evidence provided and your own visions of what makes a good life to form your own answer to the question: was farming an improvement over foraging?

*sedentary: seated; settled down; inactive

**DOCUMENT SET #2: SECONDARY SOURCES**
MARSHALL SAHLINS, EXCERPT FROM “THE ORIGINAL AFFLUENT SOCIETY”

Marshall Sahlins is an American anthropologist who is best known for his theory that hunter-gatherers were “the original affluent society,” which was first expressed in a symposium given in 1966. As a result, many anthropologists shifted their attitudes and changed their ideas about hunter-gathering societies, much in the way that new theories and findings led scientists to change their minds about topics like the size of the Universe and continental drift. Originally, many scientists looked at such societies as primitive and constantly near the edge of starvation. Sahlins suggests instead — using ethnographic studies of diet, work, and leisure time — that hunter-gathering societies were much more stable and prosperous than previously thought because they had few material wants beyond those necessary for survival.

The world’s most primitive people have few possessions, but they are not poor. Poverty is not a certain small amount of goods, nor is it just a relation between means and ends: above all it is a relation between people. Poverty is a social status. As such it is the invention of civilization. It has grown with civilization, at once as an invidious [or unjust] distinction between classes and more importantly as a tributary relation that can render agrarian peasants more susceptible to natural catastrophes than any winter camp of Alaskan Eskimo [hunter-gatherers].

Source

KEVIN REILLY, EXCERPT FROM THE WEST AND THE WORLD: A HISTORY OF CIVILIZATION

Kevin Reilly is a professor of humanities at Raritan Valley Community College and was the cofounder and first president of the World History Association.

The most obvious achievements of the first civilizations are the monuments — the pyramids, temples, palaces, statues, and treasures — that were created for the new ruling class of kings, nobles, priests, and their officials. But civilized life is much more than the capacity to create monuments.

Civilized life is secure life. At the most basic level this means security from the sudden destruction that village communities might suffer. Civilized life gives the feeling of permanence. It offers regularity, stability, order, even routine. Plans can be made. Expectations can be realized. People can be expected to act predictably, according to the rules.

The first cities were able to attain stability with walls that shielded the inhabitants from nomads and armies, with the first codes of law that defined human relationships, with police and officials that enforced the laws, and with institutions that functioned beyond the lives of their particular members. City life offered considerably more permanence and security than village life.

Source
MARK NATHAN COHEN, EXCERPT FROM HEALTH AND THE RISE OF CIVILIZATION


There is evidence that primitive populations suffer relatively low rates of many diseases compared to the more affluent modern societies. Primitive populations appear to enjoy several nutritional advantages over our affluent modern societies that protect them from many of the diseases that now afflict us. These include high bulk diets, diets with relatively few calories in proportion to other nutrients, diets low in total fat (and particularly low in saturated fat), and diets high in potassium and low in sodium. These advantages are common to such groups and appear to help protect them against a series of conditions that plague the more affluent of modern populations. Diabetes appears to be extremely rare in primitive groups (both hunter-gatherers and farmers) as are circulatory problems, including high blood pressure, heart disease, and strokes. Similarly, disorders associated with poor bowel function, such as appendicitis, hemorrhoids, and bowel cancers are extremely rare. Rates of many other types of cancer — particularly breast and lung — appear to be low in most small-scale societies. This is true even when corrected for the small proportion of the elderly often observed. Even those cancers that we now consider to be diseases of underdevelopment were the historical product of changes in human behavior involving food storage or the human-assisted spread of infections. The record of the skeletons suggests that cancers were comparatively rare in prehistory.

Source

RICHARD LEE, FROM “WHAT HUNTERS DO FOR A LIVING”

Richard Lee is a Canadian anthropologist who has written a number of books and articles on hunter-gatherer societies in southern Africa. This excerpt describes the lifestyle of a Bushmen tribe.

A woman gathers on one day enough food to feed her family for three days, and spends the rest of her time resting in camp, doing embroidery, visiting other camps, or entertaining visitors from other camps. For each day at home, kitchen routines, such as cooking, nut cracking, collecting firewood, and fetching water, occupy one to three hours of her time. This rhythm of steady work and steady leisure is maintained throughout the year. The hunters tend to work more frequently than the women, but their schedule is uneven. It is not unusual for a man to hunt avidly for a week and then do no hunting at all for two or three weeks. Since hunting is an unpredictable business and subject to magical control, hunters sometimes experience a run of bad luck and stop hunting for a month or longer. During these periods, visiting, entertaining, and especially dancing are the primary activities of men.

Source