

## The Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest in Prehistory

Human groups have occupied southwestern Montana, including the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest, for at least the last 12,000 years. Evidence for this occupation is based on material recovered from archaeological sites and ethnographic sources. A wide variety of stone tools and other cultural remains (especially plant pollen or carbonized plant seeds) which have survived through time provide information about when, where and how humans adapted to the environmental challenges presented by this area of broad valleys, high mountains and climatic extremes.



Illustration above: For thousands of years the 'Atlatl' or 'Spear Thrower' was an important weapon for Indian hunters.

Throughout prehistory human groups adapted to living in southwestern Montana pursued a hunting and gathering way of life. Over time, populations grew and social complexity increased, but at no time did aboriginal groups abandon hunting and gathering in favor of other adaptations such as pastoralism or horticulture.

### **Paleo-Indian Period: 12,000 to 6,000 Years before Present**



The oldest firmly documented human cultural groups in Montana are the hunters of the Paleo-Indian Period. Many archaeologists think this cultural tradition represents the first evidence of people arriving in the Americas. Some would put the date for human's first entrance into the Americas well before 15,000 years ago. At least some Paleo-Indian people entered North America by crossing the Bering land bridge over a period of several thousand years in different migratory episodes.

Twelve thousand years ago the climate was wetter and cooler than at present, and Paleo-Indian subsistence strategies centered on the hunting of Pleistocene mega-fauna including mammoth and giant bison. Paleo-Indians likely moved about in small family bands following the seasonal migration of the herd animals they depended on for food. In southwestern Montana, and other intermountain areas, the Paleo-Indian subsistence pattern was probably somewhat different than those Paleo peoples adapted to a strict plains environment, and highly dependent on hunting. In this area researchers have postulated a "foothill-mountain" subsistence strategy in which Paleo-Indian groups made greater use of gathered plant foods in the plains-foothill and foothill-mountain slope ecotones.

One Paleo-Indian site has been recorded on the BDNF. On adjacent BLM lands fifteen Paleo-Indian sites have been recorded. The likelihood is that many Paleo-Indian sites remain to be found on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest.

### **Archaic Period: 6,000 to 1,500 Years before Present**



Photo above: Camas root was a source of food for Indian people throughout the interior Northwest. It was one of the earliest plant foods collected in the spring and formed an important staple in their diet. Like bitterroot, collecting camas remains an important cultural tradition among many western Montana Indian people.

The term "archaic" as it relates to human cultural groups is usually understood by archaeologists to indicate a shift in cultural patterns from dependence on hunting large Pleistocene mega-fauna to a more generalized hunting and gathering subsistence strategy that emphasized the taking of modern forms of bison, deer, elk, and other ungulates. A greater dependence on plant foods in an overall more generalized subsistence pattern is also considered a hallmark of the Archaic Period.

The Archaic Period in this area is usually subdivided into Early, Middle and Late Plains Archaic, each with its own set of artifact assemblages. The principle chronological indicators remain projectile point types.

The Archaic Period was a time of important and substantial climatic shifts, particularly during the Early and Middle sub-Periods. Conditions grew more arid and forced human populations to adapt to the more difficult conditions by broadening their subsistence base. Communal bison hunts became an important subsistence strategy at this time. Social groups remained small and highly mobile. We can infer, however, that Archaic Period bands probably had some idea of home territories as opposed to the territories of adjacent bands.

Hunters and gatherers by necessity need an intimate knowledge of the opportunities present on the landscape to provide them with a living. The necessary level of knowledge about the availability of plant resources and the habits of game animals is difficult to acquire if groups are constantly moving into unfamiliar territory. Archaic hunters and gatherers tended to return to the same camp localities over time as they pursued their seasonal round of subsistence activities.

Archaic Period sites are well represented and occur in all Landscape at varying elevations and in a wide range of topographic settings. Both early (Bitterroot and Oxbow) and late (Pelican Lake) Archaic projectile point types appear in our database.

### **Late Prehistoric Period: 1,500 Years before Present to AD 1700**



Photo above: Bitterroot was a food much prized by Salish and other Indian people in western Montana. Collecting bitterroot continues to be an important cultural tradition for tribal people today.

The Late Prehistoric was a period of increasing technological complexity (e.g. introduction of the bow and arrow, which replaced the spear thrower; ceramic and steatite vessels), which was probably mirrored in increasingly complex social systems. While human groups continued to follow a hunting and gathering lifeway this Period saw the zenith of communal bison hunts. This cooperative hunting technique is manifested in the archaeological record by large and small bison kill sites.

Large communal bison hunts were certainly not the only hunting strategy employed during this Period. Sites interpreted as game drive and ambush sites occur across the Forest. The LaMarche game trap site in the East Pioneers is interpreted as a deer-hunting trap, while game drives and traps in the southern Tendoys seem to be aimed at taking Mountain Sheep.

Late Prehistoric Period sites are found throughout the Forest at all elevations and in all ecological settings. The small corner-notched and side-notched arrow points found at them usually identify these sites.

**Proto-Historic Period: AD 1700 to Aboriginal Contact with Euro-American People (ca. 1805)**

None of the above chronological periods should be seen as hard and fast points in time. There appears to be considerable overlap in time and space between many of these periods, particularly the Early, Middle and Late Plains Archaic, and between the Archaic Period and the Late Prehistoric Period.

This overlap between archaeological assemblages defining one chronological period from another is nowhere more evident than during the Proto-Historic Period. This Period is defined as a time when elements of Euro-American culture were introduced to indigenous Indian groups, without the actual presence of Euro-American people in the area. The horse, trade beads, metal goods, and later, firearms were introduced through native trade networks into southwestern Montana decades before the actual arrival of the first white people.

One confirmed and one probable Proto-Historic Period archaeological site has been identified on the Forest.