



## **Subsistence** <sup>[1]</sup>

[Explorable.com](#) <sup>[2]</sup> 13.2K reads

One cultural aspect of interest to anthropologists are the subsistence methods of a particular cultural group. Subsistence describes the means that a group uses to obtain food and resources - these are economic systems not based on the use of money.

Many subsistence economies still exist today, but originally all cultural groups subsisted off the land. Subsistence economies don't tend to produce surpluses, and often don't involve specialization or urbanization.

There are many ways that peoples subsist off the land—through foraging, agriculture, and pastoralism.

### **Foraging**

Foraging describes the practice of subsisting off of the land from wild plants and animals. It can include hunting, gathering, and fishing. Foraging was the original way that humans obtained food, but is rarely exclusively practiced today. It often involved travel and a nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle, since people had to move with the seasons as their food sources changed.

While when we typically think of ancient peoples as subsisting off the land by hunting large, wild animals, this was often not the case. Foraging describes the practice of hunting, but it also includes other popular ways of obtaining food, such as fishing, berry picking, and others. There is a chance that most foragers did at least some hunting, although anthropologists and archaeologists debate what proportion of past diets were composed of hunted meat.

Fishing was another type of foraging that was widely practiced. Foraging diets that included fishing usually relied on basic tools, such as harpoons, arrows, nets, and others.

However, we can safely assume that past diets were largely variable, since the types and amounts of foods that were consumed would have been modified in accordance with the geographic and climatic conditions.

### **Agriculture**

Another method of subsistence was agriculture—the purposeful growing of vegetables, fruits, and other plant-based products as a food source. The Neolithic Revolution—which involves the invention of agriculture—occurred about 12,000 years ago in several different regions of

the world, and led to widespread ecological and cultural changes. However, before larger-scale agriculture began, horticulture was widely practiced.

Horticulture is similar to agriculture, yet it occurs on a smaller-scale and involves growing several different crops in a small area. This starkly contrasts today's agricultural systems, which often take up huge areas of land for a single type of crop.

The increasing prevalence of horticulture led many cultural groups to rely less on foraging methods and thus become less nomadic, eventually creating permanent settlements.

## **Pastoralism**

Pastoralism is the raising of herds of farm animals, especially as a food source. Pastoralism thrived because of animal domestication, where traits that were advantageous to humans were selected during the breeding process.

Societies that use pastoralism as a subsistence method can either be nomadic, partly-nomadic, or settled. Nomadic pastoralists follow herds of animals through their seasonal routes to obtain resources from them year-round. Partly-nomadic pastoralists also exist, and involve a part of the group leaving to travel with the herd, and the other part staying at home. Most pastoral societies eventually became fully settled, where animals were raised on the same land as the settlement.

---

**Source URL:** <https://explorable.com/subsistence?gid=21201>

### **Links**

[1] <https://explorable.com/subsistence>

[2] <https://explorable.com/>