

LETTER FROM THE FIELD

Jay Fancher's letter is based on his dissertation fieldwork with the Aka of central Africa in 2001-2002. Fancher is in the Ph.D. program in the Department of Anthropology, Washington State University, Pullman.

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The Central African rain forest presents many challenges. More accurately, the tropical forest presented me, an archaeologist from the Pacific Northwest, with many challenges. The Aka foragers were not nearly as challenged and were rightly amused by my gradual adaptation to this new environment.

Forest foragers (often referred to as “pygmies” in the past) have lived in the forest for at least the last 2000 years, and possibly much longer. With this experience and an intimate knowledge of their rain forest home, they navigated through the dense vegetation in ways that appeared impossible to me. In fact, they were mildly surprised every time I stubbed my toe, tripped on a log, got tangled in vines, or smacked my head on a branch. The Aka move through the rain forest like shadows and, despite walking a brisk 5 to 20 kilometers a day in intense heat and humidity, never seem out of breath and rarely break a sweat. In contrast, they were shocked by my constant and profuse sweating. Worse yet, this sweat attracted insects and my head was usually surrounded by a swirling cloud of buzzing flies. Often times, I couldn't hear people speaking to me over the buzzing. I haven't even mentioned the chiggers that burrow into your skin, snakes, disease, dehydration, etc. The list goes on...

Why would anyone in their right mind choose to work in such a place? First, like many archaeologists, I am fascinated by the ways that humans adapt to a range of environments, just as I gradually adapted to equatorial Africa. People have an amazing and unique ability to live almost anywhere on our planet. Second, I love a challenge. This, too, is a trait that many archaeologists have in common.

You might wonder how running around the rain forest with Aka hunters qualifies as archaeological research. Most people associate archaeology with ancient artifacts and people who have been dead for a long, long time. Archaeologists always talk about how the past is connected to the present, and how understanding the past allows us to view the world of today in a broader context. Sometimes we forget that archaeologists are more interested in what artifacts can tell us about *people* than the objects themselves. In general, archaeologists spend far more time searching for information than for treasure.



We're also becoming increasingly aware that people of the present have a lot to contribute to our understanding of people of the past. This type of research is often referred to as ethnoarchaeology – studying present-day people to gain insights into the past. The Aka live in the present, but their lifestyle, usually called hunting and gathering or foraging, can tell us a lot about how past peoples, who had a similar lifestyle, lived. In this sense, we conducted archaeological research in the Central African Republic without actually digging a site. We used handheld tape recorders and metric scales to collect data rather than trowels and brushes.

Despite being puzzled by our strange behavior and odd requests, the Aka were remarkably gracious hosts. We were particularly interested in the Aka use of food. Some of our methods of gathering information must have been ridiculous to them. Why would anybody want to accompany them on a hunt (when it obviously made us sweat so much)? Why would we want to weigh the leaves, caterpillars, and honey that they collected? Why were we so interested in the specifics of the duiker (a deer-like animal that's the size of a small dog) and rats that they killed for food? Oddest of all, when the Aka were done eating dinner each night, we asked them for the animal bones that they had just finished chewing the meat off of. Who wouldn't question the sanity of people who traveled thousands of miles to collect garbage? Occasionally, in the middle of an exhausting trek through the rain forest, I would question my own sanity and wonder if it was all worthwhile.

In the end, however, there was method to our apparent madness and the benefits far outweighed the difficult fieldwork. Ethnoarchaeological research is helping us to better understand how prehistoric foragers in the tropics may have hunted, shared meat, and left marks on the bones that they threw away after dinner. More importantly, some of the knowledge that we gain from ethnoarchaeology can be applied to people all over the world. Understanding the details of how modern foragers live helps us develop methods of finding evidence of ancient foragers in the dirt. That kind of understanding is worth a lot to people who are passionate about human prehistory – enough that the challenges of the Central African rain forest seem more like opportunities. To put it another way, the fieldwork was challenging and I didn't bring back any treasure (other than a big box of animal bones), but the experience, perspective, and information I returned with are priceless.

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