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Review of *Behavioral Ecology and the Transition to Agriculture* by Douglas J. Kennett and Bruce Winterhalder

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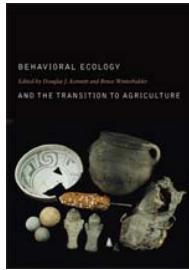
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Reviews

Behavioral Ecology and the Transition to Agriculture



Douglas J. Kennett and Bruce Winterhalder

ISBN: 0-520-24647-0

University of California Press 2006

Human Behavioral Ecology (HBE) has been used for more than two decades to examine hunter-gatherer societies. Kennett and Winterhalder's edited volume takes HBE in new directions, applying well-known concepts and models to the transition from foraging to farming. While many edited volumes lack focus, this one is a well-written and cohesive document. Winterhalder and Kennett's introductory chapter provides a clear summary of HBE literature and a review of common concepts. This makes individual case studies approachable even to HBE newcomers.

The book is not sectioned, but the case studies in Chapters 2 to 12 can be divided based on subject matter. Chapters 2 through 6 (by Tucker, Gremillion, Diehl and Waters, Barlow, and Kennett et al.) constitute one of the most important and substantive discussions in the book. Tucker writes from an ethnographic perspective, while the others examine largely archaeological cases. All five chapters conclude that a mixed foraging-farming economy is often stable for long periods of time. This conclusion is particularly compelling in archaeological circles, as it suggests that the "transition" phase between foraging and farming may actually have been an adaptive mechanism in its own right. Thus, the period spanning any shift from foraging to farming should be examined based on local ecology and historical trajectories, rather than envisioned as a short-term shift between two more successful subsistence strategies. This conclusion may affect the way many archaeologists and anthropologists form research questions about the "transition" between foraging and farming, minimizing problems of oversimplification that have occurred in past discussions of "the Neolithic Revolution".

Most of the remaining authors, as the editors acknowledge, are relatively new to HBE theory and technique. As in all edited volumes, some chapters are stronger than others. One or two chapters seemed only loosely tied to HBE. However, most have HBE methods or models soundly at the core of their analysis. This leads to a sort of "grab bag" feel in the book, in which various HBE concepts are used almost independently of one another. This is, however, one of the problems with HBE as a whole—it encompasses such a broad spectrum of theoretical approaches and analytical techniques that can be difficult to synthesize. As such, this critique may be more aptly addressed to HBE as a whole than to the book itself. The final two chapters, together with Chapter 1, examine the importance of HBE while also acknowledging its shortcomings. They neatly tie the book together, acting as both summary and expression of future directions.

This book shows what empirical methods and modeling can do when properly executed. Modeling, in particular, is a complicated issue for anthropologists. To model a phenomenon is to simplify that phenomenon into manageable variables. Modeling of any kind has thus faced warranted criticism in anthropology, which studies very complex and highly integrated human social systems. Many of these articles use highly sophisticated and satisfyingly complex models pulled from HBE to elucidate the multivariate social and environmental mechanisms involved in subsistence strategies and the issues of foraging vs. farming. At the same time, the language in every chapter is surprisingly transparent, allowing the reader to judge for him- or herself the accuracy and importance of this volume.

Reviewed by Ellie Haywood-Maclin, Department of Anthropology at the University of Georgia