

Hunters and Gatherers in the Twenty-First Century

KAREN L. KRAMER AND BRIAN F. CODDING

Introduction

Prior to the onset of the Holocene about twelve thousand years ago, humans shared the globe only with other hunter-gatherers and made their living exclusively by collecting wild resources.¹ With domestication, some foragers transitioned to agriculture and pastoralism. But this transition was not inevitable. Many hunter-gatherers continued to forage, while others pursued a mixed economy combining wild resources with the low-level use of domesticated plants and animals. By the 1960s hunter-gatherers were estimated to represent 1 percent of the world's population (Lee and Devore 1968). Due to rapid population growth, habitat transformation, and globalization, that percentage is far smaller today. But one thing is certain: hunter-gatherers are still here.

Foraging persists in the contemporary world as a viable economic strategy in remote regions as well as within the bounds of developed nation-states. This fact frames the central question we address in this book: given the economic alternatives available in the twenty-first century, why do some choose to maintain their hunting and gathering lifeways? Rather than viewing the decline in hunting and gathering as conclusive, the contributors to this book examine the decisions made by modern-day foragers to sustain a predominantly hunting and gathering way of life. In this introductory chapter, we briefly discuss the history of hunter-gatherer research, present the current status of some hunter-gatherer populations, and outline the main findings discussed in this book (figure I.1).

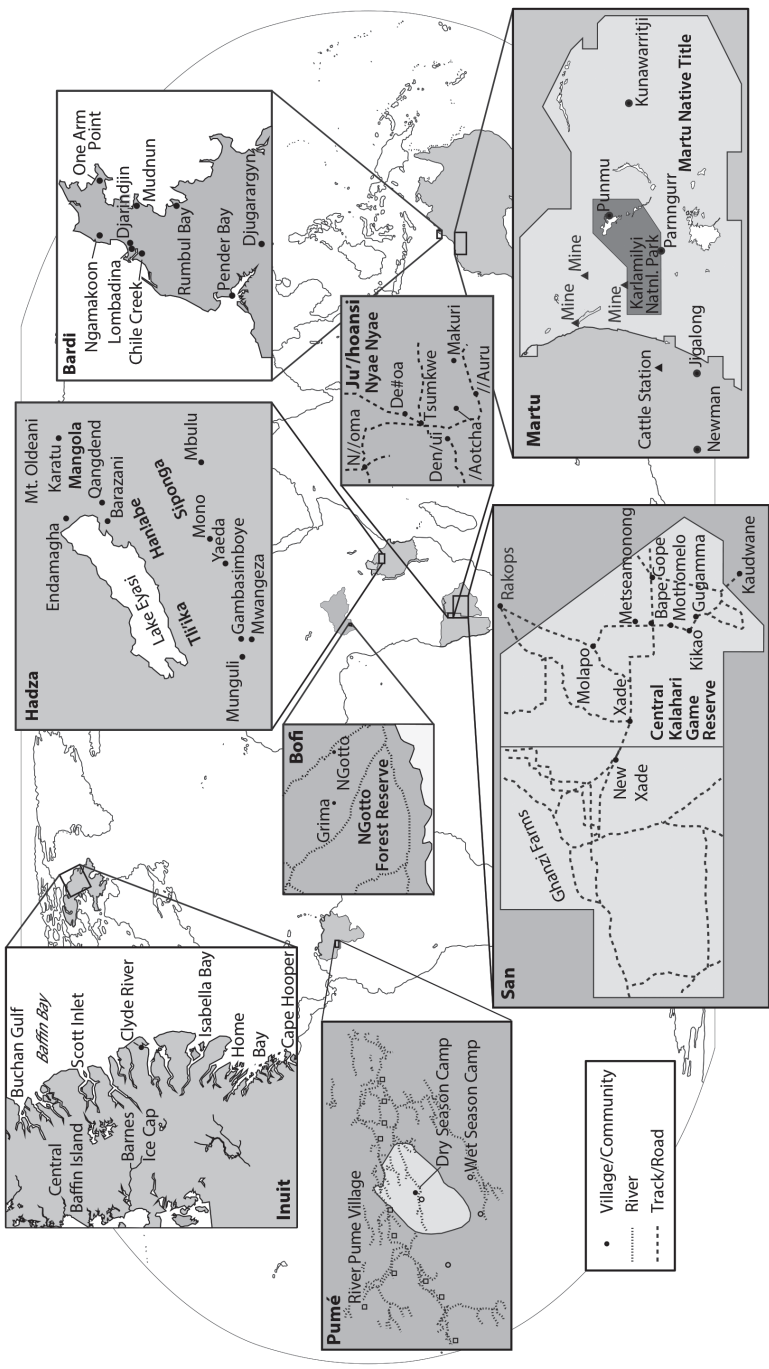


Figure I.1. The global distribution of hunter-gatherer populations discussed in this volume with inserts highlighting locations mentioned in each chapter. Map by the authors, compiled by Ellyse Simmons.