Bear hunting at the Pleistocene/Holocene transition on the northern Northwest Coast of North America

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Abstract

Recent discoveries on the northern Northwest Coast of North America provide evidence of bear hunting dating to the Pleistocene/Holocene transition. This paper describes the faunal assemblage from the Kilgii Gwaay wet site in southern Haida Gwaii. This assemblage includes a high proportion of remains of black bear. Ethological data, ethnographic sources, and the archaeological record are examined in order to provide an interpretative context for this assemblage and others in this region. The significance of bear hunting, the use of different hunting strategies, the economic utility of bears, bear ceremonialism, and the occurrence of bear bones at other Pleistocene archaeological sites are discussed. Evidence from Kilgii Gwaay suggests that bear hunting at the Pleistocene/Holocene transition on the northern Northwest Coast had both economic and ceremonial significance.

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When to hunt Bear? Bear hunting dates depend on the bear’s greatest evolutionary adaptation: winter slumber. They center on the periods when the bruins are feeding actively to accumulate enough fat to last them through the winter (in autumn), or to make up for the fast (in spring).

On the Pacific Coast the best opportunities for bear hunting often coincide with salmon runs. Jan. Feb. Humans devised many ways of bear hunting. Sometimes bears are taken with dogs, packs of hounds in North America or one or two dogs of local breeds in Eurasia. Spot-and-stalk hunting is also possible in the wide open spaces of the Arctic and the American West, and so is still-hunting along salmon rivers. Dwellings Northern Coast Salish people built three types of permanent plank houses (semiexcavated and with shed and gabled roofs). Planks could be removed and transported to permanent frameworks at summer villages. Some houses were up to 60 or 70 feet long and half as wide. Most were fortified with either stockades or deep trenches. Comox Band controls four reserves on 285 hectares of land on the east coast of Vancouver Island. The reserves were allotted in 1877. The population is 243, of whom 103 people live on the reserves. Elections are held under the provisions of the Indian Act. The band is affiliated with the Kwakiutl District Council. None are previously known for the North American Subarctic and Arctic. The remains of a child who was cremated and buried, and the nearby residential artifacts, at the Upward Sun River site provide new cultural information regarding early Beringians. Map of excavation site of early human remains in North America. Image courtesy of Ben A. Potter. The Upward Sun River site provides data for a number of important problems regarding colonization of the New World and human adaptations at the Pleistocene – Holocene transition. Excavating the burial pit (L-R): Joshua D. Reuther, Ben A. Potter, and Joel D. Irish. Image courtesy of Ben A. Potter.