

"Megafauna in a Continent of Small Game: Archaeological Implications of Martu Camel Hunting in Australia's Western Desert"



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Archaeologists often assume that large mammals are inherently highly ranked prey, especially attractive to cooperative hunters using sophisticated technologies common among foragers since the late Pleistocene. This assumption lies at the heart of many arguments that overhunting played a role in megafaunal loss and subsequent impacts on global ecosystems and economic intensification. Over most of human occupation, Australia was a continent devoid of megafauna, but between 1840 and 1907 over 10,000 dromedary camels were imported, and today feral populations number well over a million.

Although contemporary Aboriginal hunters in Australia's Western and Central Deserts regularly encounter camels, they rarely pursue them. I present data on camel encounter and pursuit rates, with comparisons of search and handling efficiency relative to other foraging options among Martu, the Traditional Owners of a large region of the Western Desert. I then explore some hypotheses of factors that shape resource values as emergent properties of dynamic ecological relationships, social and material costs, mobility, and strategic interaction in the pursuit of symbolic capital. These values are set in a context unique to the contemporary mixed foraging/cash economy of remote desert Aboriginal communities, but are fundamentally delimited by ritually constituted commitments to mundane egalitarianism, autonomy, and highly fluid arrangements of production and residence. In some respects the case runs counter to common expectations about hunting large ungulates, and highlights the special kinds of collective action problems that large game acquisition might entail in many contexts. The data should therefore provide insight into socio-ecological contexts of large ungulate hunting and its archaeological signatures.

Doug Bird (Senior Research Scientist, Stanford, Anthropology, Bill Lane Center for the American West) is an ecological anthropologist with interests in resource use ecology, ethnoarchaeology, and questions surrounding livelihoods and landscape change in Indigenous Australia. The goal of his research is to better understand the role of Indigenous people (their decisions, practices, knowledge, and articulation with settler colonialism) in the construction and care of ecological communities. He has published widely on his work with Indigenous Australians, recently focusing on interactions between subsistence decisions, social relationships, and ecological heterogeneity in increasingly vulnerable environments that comprise Martu Country in the vast Western Desert.

Monday

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ANTHROPOLOGY BROWN BAG