

# Farmers have less leisure time than hunter-gatherers, study suggests

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Credit: University of Cambridge

Hunter-gatherers in the Philippines who adopt farming work around ten hours a week longer than their forager neighbours, a new study suggests, complicating the idea that agriculture represents progress. The research

also shows that a shift to agriculture impacts most on the lives of women.

For two years, a team including University of Cambridge anthropologist Dr. Mark Dyble, lived with the Agta, a population of small scale [hunter-gatherers](#) from the northern Philippines who are increasingly engaging in agriculture.

Every day, at [regular intervals](#) between 6am and 6pm, the researchers recorded what their hosts were doing and by repeating this in ten different communities, they calculated how 359 people divided their time between [leisure](#), childcare, domestic chores and out-of-camp work. While some Agta communities engage exclusively in hunting and gathering, others divide their time between foraging and [rice farming](#).

The study, published today in *Nature Human Behaviour*, reveals that increased engagement in farming and other non-foraging work resulted in the Agta working harder and losing [leisure time](#). On average, the team estimate that Agta engaged primarily in farming work around 30 hours per week while foragers only do so for 20 hours. They found that this dramatic difference was largely due to women being drawn away from domestic activities to working in the fields. The study found that women living in the communities most involved in farming had half as much leisure time as those in communities which only foraged.

Dr. Dyble, first author of the study, says: "For a long time, the transition from foraging to farming was assumed to represent progress, allowing people to escape an arduous and precarious way of life.

"But as soon as anthropologists started working with hunter-gatherers they began questioning this narrative, finding that foragers actually enjoy quite a lot of leisure time. Our data provides some of the clearest support for this idea yet."

The study found that on average, Agta adults spent around 24 hours each week engaged in out-of-camp work, around 20 hours each week doing domestic chores and around 30 hours of daylight leisure time. But the researchers found that time allocation differed significantly between adults.

For both men and women leisure time was lowest at around 30 years of age, steadily increasing in later life. There was also a sexual division of labour with women spending less time working out-of-camp, and more time engaged in domestic chores and childcare than men, even though men and women had a similar amount of leisure time. However, the study found that the adoption of farming had a disproportionate impact on women's lives.

Dr. Dyble says "This might be because agricultural work is more easily shared between the sexes than hunting or fishing. Or there may be other reasons why men aren't prepared or able to spend more time working out-of-camp. This needs further examination."

Agriculture emerged independently in multiple locations world-wide around 12,500 years ago, and had replaced hunting and gathering as the dominant mode of human subsistence around 5,000 years ago.

Co-author, Dr. Abigail Page, an anthropologist at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, adds: "We have to be really cautious when extrapolating from contemporary hunter-gatherers to different societies in pre-history. But if the first farmers really did work harder than foragers then this begs an important question—why did humans adopt agriculture?"

Previous studies, including one on the Agta, have variously linked the adoption of farming to increases in fertility, population growth and productivity, as well as the emergence of increasingly hierarchical

political structures.

But Page says: "The amount of leisure time that Agta enjoy is testament to the effectiveness of the hunter-gatherer way of life. This leisure [time](#) also helps to explain how these communities manage to share so many skills and so much knowledge within lifetimes and across generations."

**More information:** Engagement in agricultural work is associated with reduced leisure time among Agta hunter-gatherers, *Nature Human Behaviour* (2019). [DOI: 10.1038/s41562-019-0614-6](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-019-0614-6) , [www.nature.com/articles/s41562-019-0614-6](https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-019-0614-6)

Provided by University of Cambridge

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