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Temperate Forest Subsistence and Settlement: A Reassessment

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TEMPERATE FOREST SUBSISTENCE AND SETTLEMENT: A REASSESSMENT

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The following is a summary of the results of the workshop entitled "Temperate Forest Subsistence and Settlement." To some extent, relative to what was expected of us, this title and the charge to the group was redefined, but not so much as to become unrecognizable.

Initially, a number of problems perceived in traditional settlement pattern studies were discussed. Some of these included inadequate definitions of settlement patterns as a model, how they have been employed as heuristic devices, and briefly, considerations of the results of a decade of settlement pattern studies in the Northeast.

A fundamental problem concerned the representativeness of settlement patterns for the study of human behavior, and the inadequacy of the archaeological record (the data base) for the study of settlement patterns. It was decided that if we were to approach the problem at hand, it would be first necessary to explicate assumptions generally applied to settlement and subsistence studies. In all, five assumptions were discussed. These are:

Assumption 1: ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALOGS: THE DIRECT APPROACH

The use of ethnographic models has been an important aspect in traditional settlement studies. Some individuals in the group felt that an excessive and uncritical reliance in ethnographic analogy in the Northeast has been a limiting factor, and has adversely affected progress in our work. Controls were seen to be often lacking in the application of analogy. Also, questions were raised regarding the comparability of the archaeological situation and the ethnographic analog, i.e., are they in fact as comparable as we claim or even wish? Because factors such as cultural contamination resulting from contact intervene, the utility of analogs was seriously questioned. Others in the group felt that there was still much important descriptive work to be done in our area, and that the rejection of analogy left no viable alternative. It was suggested instead that descriptive ethnoarchaeological studies be intensified. Material culture studies should be included among the primary goals of archaeological research. It was also urged that research interests be increasingly focused on explaining functional variability in the archaeological record via these ethnoarchaeological studies.

Assumption 2: THE USE OF REGION AS A PRIMARY UNIT OF ANALYSIS

A good deal of time was spent discussing the problems inherent in defining "region." It was agreed that region as a classificatory entity cannot be defined in the abstract, but instead, varies depending on the research problem. It was urged that it be defined explicitly for the research at hand. This definitional problem must be resolved before we can deal adequately with the region as a classificatory or modeling device.

Assumption 3: RESOURCE DETERMINISM

Subsistence or resource determinism has traditionally been the factor dictating site location. Simply stated, sites are considered to have been located solely in response to resource availability. Social and ideational determinants are not a full consideration.

Assumption 4: THE SITE AS AN ANALYTICAL UNIT

This assumption concerns the site as a unit of analysis and also assumptions that are made in identifying the present archaeological data base as representative of "reality." Within this assumption were found several difficulties. These include:

A. The archaeological record is incomplete.
B. We have not been sampling in non-sensitive environments, thus our survey strategies have been self-fulfilling.
C. We are unable to deal adequately with the notion of site size.
D. Archaeological data are derived from a diverse number and quality of sources.
E. Sites are not only difficult to define, but we are often not sure how to find them.

However, the consensus was that this is the nature of the data base. We must, therefore, improve it as much as possible, but avoid becoming catatonic if it is in some way lacking.

Assumption 5: COMPLETE KNOWLEDGE OF THE ENVIRONMENT

A final assumption is in regard to the putative knowledge of the environment. This is based not only on the understanding of the anthropologist, but also on an assumed complete understanding by the native informants, or those individuals who had occupied the site. That is, traditionally, analyses of sites and their location in terms of subsistence has been predicated on the assumption that we, the researchers, have a complete knowledge of environmental details and that this was also the case for the sites' inhabitants. This clearly is not and was not the case.

Following a discussion of the various assumptions listed above, no conclusions were reached concerning the direction, utility and validity of settlement pattern studies in the Northeast as they have been conducted in the past. Nor was a consensus reached as to the direction of future research.

In order to assist in the clarification of our problem, now replete with the primary assumptions applied in traditional settlement pattern studies, it was decided to establish the goal of our work from a very basic perspective. This goal is to understand past human behavior. This was then narrowed to the questions:

1. How are societies organized for maintenance?

2. Why do these maintenance strategies change over time? and

3. Why do these maintenance strategies vary through space?

Informal discussion resulted in a number of recommendations regarding how the stated goal could be attained. It seemed evident that we cannot reconstruct, to our satisfaction, settlement patterns using the traditional concept of region in the Northeast. We have no readily apparent methods to deal with the concept effectively and with the resolution required to attain our goals. We cannot expect full representation of the data; furthermore, there is a lack of resolution in the time scale. Finally, the variable of region size is impossible to control. It was emphasized that this was not to malign past settlement studies, but that they had reached the limits of their use, and further research along traditional lines is not likely to solve problems concerning human behavior. It was the sense of the majority that our focus should be on maintenance strategies occurring within human communities on the scale of the locale. The use of maintenance strategy, a concept from population biology, as suggested by Dena Dincauze requires setting aside the settlement pattern concept as it now stands. What would be required is the application of appropriate theory and method to investigate maintenance strategies in a given locale. The study of maintenance strategies can be accomplished in terms of the following data classes:

1. Full, detailed environmental data of both natural and social systems;

2. Full, detailed information on technology;

3. A study of the social environment, that is, social organization, both within and adjacent to the locale;

4. The recovery of data on the biological modes of adaptation;

5. The explication of data of the ideational culture.

Discussion at this point became rather fragmented. Concerns were voiced regarding how such classes might be recovered; assumptions regarding the data classes; models these data classes might be placed in, e.g., the region, or the locale. Agreements need to be reached regarding what classes of data might be recovered. The kinds of data to be collected need to be explicitly enumerated.

It was felt that there should be less reductionism in our theory, and that we should generalize and particularize from the threshold of the locale. Our prime concern should be a comparison of locales looking for variation, the indicator of change, the understanding of which is a fundamental goal in archaeology.

For example, implementation of the study of maintenance strategies might be accomplished through investigation into:

1. human populations in a variety of locales;

2. information processing on a regional scale;

3. the processes of adjustments to environmental change;

4. the effect of rapid change on human populations;

5. seasonality studies based on faunal analysis;

6. style analyses and lithic resources analyses and how they relate to economy, social organization, and other aspects of the cultural system;

7. the effect of contact on aboriginal populations;

8. vegetational changes through time and its effect on human populational change.

These investigations would require background work which would: build a more precise and inclusive environmental data base; interest non-anthropologists in research areas of mutual interest; define variables requisite in explaining the articulation between settlements; establish criteria to be used to differentiate types of groups, movements, and other aspects of the dynamics of cultural systems.