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Confessions of a Paleo Diet Pioneer

Melvin Konner, whose work on ancient eating habits helped lead to the low-carb paleo diet, gives us an updated version of what we should be eating



A bushman from the Khomani San community strikes a traditional pose in the Southern Kalahari desert in South Africa. Our ancestors ate meat, fish and plant foods from the wild, but in what proportions? *PHOTO: DAN KITWOOD/GETTY IMAGES*

By **MELVIN KONNER**

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I have a stake of sorts in the “paleo diet” fads whose zealots urge their disciples to keep all carbs to a palm-size mound a day. I helped to originate a version of the idea—little knowing what it would turn into. Think of Mary Shelley’s ambitious scientist creating something that comes back to haunt him.

In 1985 my friend and colleague Boyd Eaton and I wrote a paper titled “Paleolithic Nutrition: A Consideration of Its Nature and Current Implications,” which appeared in *The New England Journal of Medicine*. We reasoned that if other animals have certain diets that are natural to them—pet lovers will recognize this idea—then humans might, too. But where to find evidence? The archaeological record of what we ate while evolving was sparse. Our ancestors ate meat, fish and plant foods from the wild, but in what proportions?

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compiled data from 20th-century studies of what recent hunter-gatherers ate and tried to come up with a composite picture. One example was the people I had lived with in Botswana, usually called Bushmen. Anthropologists estimated that their diet was 70% plant foods—a surprise to those who thought of ancestral humans as hunters first. We calculated the world-wide average for hunter-gatherers at 65%, but we now know that this figure was too high. My own estimate today is 50-50, but others, including Boyd,

think that the diet included more flesh and fish.

Whatever the ratio, our theory was that early humans who made it past the gantlet of childhood microbes—which led to very high infant mortality and low life expectancy on average—would be much less likely to suffer the plagues of modern life: diabetes, heart disease, stroke, cancer. We still think that a mismatch between the lifestyle to which our genes are adapted and current habits helps to explain these new epidemics. Human beings evolved in a very different world from our own. Our ancestors' watchword was to eat while you can, the more calories the better—which didn't do much harm when you had to earn every calorie and the spectrum of foods was healthier.



Raw steak and veggies. Our ancestors' watchword was to eat while you can, the more calories the better—which didn't do much harm when you had to earn every calorie and the spectrum of foods was healthier.
PHOTO: ISTOCK

Our argument has met with valid criticisms. In 1985 scientists believed that few genetic changes had occurred since we were all hunting and gathering, say 10,000 years ago. Now we know that lots of genes have changed. One fascinating new finding is that within the last few thousand years Eskimos evolved genes for enzymes to process the fatty acids in Arctic fish.

How do we know that we haven't adapted to the average American diet? Because Twinkies and sodas have been around too short a time for evolution to deal with them. So *that* mismatch is alive and well.

Still, humans are omnivores. Neither the “meat-as-a-condiment” wisdom of the heart-healthy scientists nor the “carbs-as-a-condiment” faith that now passes for “paleo” is persuasive to me. In a 2014 paper in the *Journal of Human Evolution*, Amanda Henry and her colleagues found that even our Neanderthal cousins ate barley broth along with their steaks. Once thought of as extreme carnivores, Neanderthals were actually diet opportunists, just like our own direct ancestors.

Recent data on these issues make me more comfortable today saying what *not* to eat. Our ancestors had no refined carbs, which are killing us. We'd be wise to limit salt and saturated fat, which our ancestors' prey had little of, and fiber and omega-three fatty acids seem to be good. Most humans have to avoid dairy; many must avoid wheat. Find out if you're one of them. Exercise. That's about it.

Anthropologists know that people obsess about diet. Kosher and halal diets are about discipline, not health. Hundreds of millions in India never let flesh cross their lips. All of these strategies—low-carb paleo diets, too—seem to be compatible with life and health. Within these bounds, pick your poison. With care, you can extend your life—but as far as I know, nobody lives forever.