

Prehistoric Times: Using Fire and Tools in the Stone Age

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People of the Stone Age did not have the luxury of turning on the TV. They could not watch programs that offered home repair tips. Nor could they dial 911 when a fire threatened them. Rather, they had to invent tools and learn to control the power of fire. They also conducted the first experiments in tool-making. This led to the TVs, cell phones and computers that we all enjoy.

Today, we don't necessarily think of fire or tools as technologies. However, the definition of technology is the "practical application of knowledge in a certain area." So, learning how to tame and use fire was a very important technological advance. It helped the human race move forward.

Early humans made many other technological leaps. These included learning how to sharpen a flint, a type of hard stone that was used for making fire. Flint was also used for making tools.

Practical uses of fire

Uncontrolled fire terrified our ancestors and still has the power to terrify today. Forest and house fires are still terrible problems. Take time to think of all of the practical uses of fire or its alternatives. Where would we be today without it? What was its importance to early people?

There is disagreement as to exactly when humans first controlled the use of fire. If early humans controlled it, how did they start a fire? We do not have firm answers, but they may have used pieces of flint stones banged together to create sparks. They may have rubbed two sticks together generating enough heat to start a blaze. Conditions of these sticks had to be perfect for a fire.

The earliest humans were terrified of fire just as animals were. Yet, they had the intelligence to recognize that they could use fire for many purposes. Fire provided warmth and light and kept wild animals away at night. A fire was useful in hunting. Hunters with torches could drive a herd of animals over the edge of a cliff.

People also learned that they could cook food with fire and preserve meat with smoke. Cooking made food taste better and easier to swallow. This was important for those without teeth.

The early humans of 2 million years ago did not have the skills to make fire. If they needed it, they would wait until they found something burning naturally. Eventually, nightly campfires became a habit. People would gather around the fire each night to share stories of the day's hunt and activities, to laugh and to relax.

The earliest evidence suggests that fire was first used in stone hearths about a million years ago.

Digging into Stone Age tools

Scientists have found Stone Age tools 25,000-50,000 years old all over the world. The most common are daggers and spear points for hunting. Scientists have also found hand axes and choppers for cutting up meat and scrapers for cleaning animal hides. Other tools were used to dig dirt, peel bark and remove the skins of animals. Later, pieces of bone were used as needles and fishhooks.

Cro-Magnons lived about 25,000 years ago. They introduced tools such as the bow and arrow, fishhooks, fish spears and harpoons that were constructed from bones and antlers of animals. Logs were hollowed out to create canoes. Crossing rivers and deep-water fishing became possible.

A More Certain Food Supply

Advances in tool-making technology led to advances in agriculture, and farming revolutionized the world and set early humans on a course toward modernity. Inventions such as the plow helped in the planting of seeds. Humans no longer had to depend on luck, and their food supply became much more certain. Permanent settlements were soon to follow. Animals were raised for food as well as to do work.

Modern, civilized societies began to appear around the globe. Human life as we know it started to flourish.