

DESICCATION



Climate Change in the Ancient Southwest

by Toby Herbst



Fellow Seekers, here we are on the Verge of a New World with big changes in store, more record high temperatures and so many hurricanes that we have already gone through the 26 letters of the alphabet and the season isn't over yet.

All this stuff gets pretty depressing; I had to clear my mind, cleanse my soul, take a break. Hey I know, you probably need a break as well. Why don't you come along and join me? Don't be afraid. Step into the Way-Back Machine and I will set the dial for the year 6,000 B.C., some 8,000 years ago. Gears grind, lights flash, colors swirl, and with a tremendous thump we land...somewhere. Climbing out of the machine what do we see? A vast empty space that looks pretty much the same as today's world, only a touch greener, but without a trace of the 21st century A.D.

About 12,000 to 8,000* years ago, the southwest of what will become the United States was

going through a climatic change, a drying out, a desiccation. This had nothing to do with man's intervention. This had to do with the melting of the glaciers, and shifting patterns of winds and currents.

Before 12,000 years ago, the southwest had been greener, cooler and wetter with less seasonal extremes. In lower elevations the land was more savanna-like, with great pluvial lakes edged with groves of oak and walnut trees. At that time, New Mexico was drained with numerous river systems, which is why when one is out in the bone dry desert, you find river cobbles where there are no rivers. Spruce-fir, as well as, ponderosa forests covered lower elevations than they do today.

Mega fauna consisted of great mammoths in the grasslands, and mastodons browsing in the conifer forests, giant ground sloths and vast herds of bison antiquus. Great carnivores such as the giant short faced bear, the saber-toothed cat,

an enormous lion, and the dire wolf preyed on these giant herbivores. Swift proto-horses and camelids grazed and raced across the grasslands.

Around 12,000 years ago, two major things happened in the Southwest that would change the region forever. First, the region slowly started to dry out. This was the onset of a geologic period known as the Holocene. The second major event was the arrival of man. These were the ancestors of Native Americans, though there might have been a few Caucasoids thrown into the mix.

These peoples are known by their artifact/tool assemblages: Clovis Man and Folsom Man. They were big game hunters of mega fauna; following, ambushing, and killing them with their beautiful, fluted points. They must have gorged on masses of animal fat and protein while following the vast herds and harvesting them as they went. At first,



▲ Mastodon sketch by Rembrandt Peale, c. 1801

▼ The Ancient Landscape

* Dates I have used are rough estimates



their prey had no awareness of this new type of predator and must have been easy pickings.

However, within a few thousand years, of the 50 species of mammals over 90 pounds, 70% were gone... extinct. Gone forever were the mammoths, mastodons and ground sloths. Whether this was from over-hunting or the desiccation of the region, no one knows. Probably, it was both.

The long and short of it is that First Man was at a crossroads, mostly due to climate change, just like we are today. In the Holocene, the great lakes were disappearing and the conifer forests were retreating to higher elevations. The

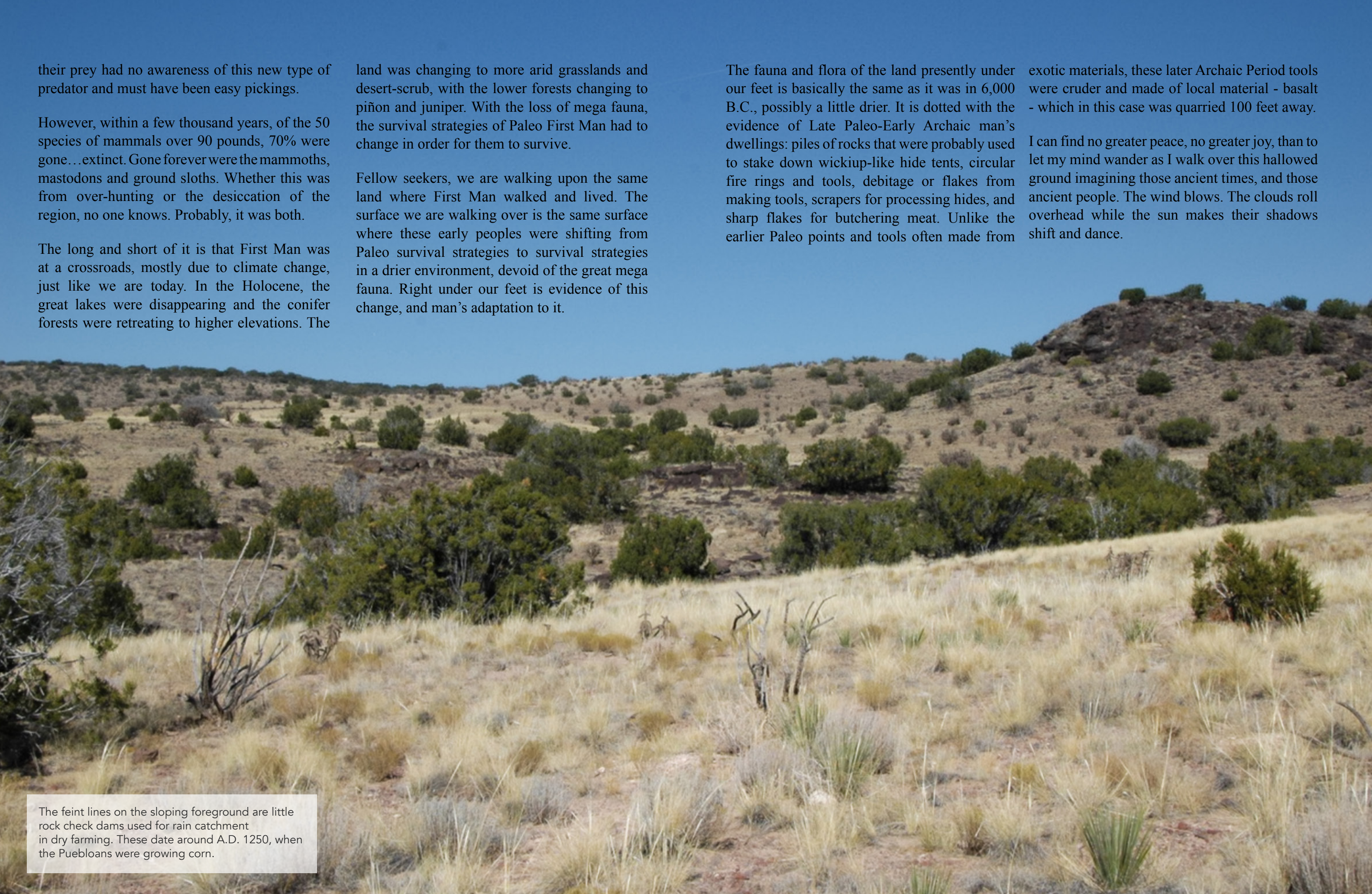
land was changing to more arid grasslands and desert-scrub, with the lower forests changing to piñon and juniper. With the loss of mega fauna, the survival strategies of Paleo First Man had to change in order for them to survive.

Fellow seekers, we are walking upon the same land where First Man walked and lived. The surface we are walking over is the same surface where these early peoples were shifting from Paleo survival strategies to survival strategies in a drier environment, devoid of the great mega fauna. Right under our feet is evidence of this change, and man's adaptation to it.

The fauna and flora of the land presently under our feet is basically the same as it was in 6,000 B.C., possibly a little drier. It is dotted with the evidence of Late Paleo-Early Archaic man's dwellings: piles of rocks that were probably used to stake down wickiup-like hide tents, circular fire rings and tools, debitage or flakes from making tools, scrapers for processing hides, and sharp flakes for butchering meat. Unlike the earlier Paleo points and tools often made from

exotic materials, these later Archaic Period tools were cruder and made of local material - basalt - which in this case was quarried 100 feet away.

I can find no greater peace, no greater joy, than to let my mind wander as I walk over this hallowed ground imagining those ancient times, and those ancient people. The wind blows. The clouds roll overhead while the sun makes their shadows shift and dance.

A wide-angle photograph of a dry, hilly landscape under a clear blue sky. The foreground is dominated by dry, yellowish-brown grasses and scattered green shrubs. In the middle ground, there are several small, dark, rectangular structures built into the slope, which are identified as little rock check dams. The background shows rolling hills with similar vegetation. The overall scene is arid and appears to be a natural habitat with some human-made features.

The faint lines on the sloping foreground are little rock check dams used for rain catchment in dry farming. These date around A.D. 1250, when the Puebloans were growing corn.

When I first started this story the Main Point was that these ancient people had faced the challenge of climate change; that they survived and eventual prospered. This new period of adaptation is called the Archaic and it lasted for over 5,000 years, which is evidence of a pretty stable and successful survival strategy. This strategy gradually evolved into a more sedentary lifestyle with increasing emphasis on plant based diets, culminating in the development of agriculture.

This past summer, Santa Fe had more days above 90 degrees than ever before in recorded

history; and we are at 7,000 ft in altitude. Total precipitation over the summer was 1.5 inches. 2020 had more hurricanes and tropical storms than ever in recorded history. Unfortunately, the climate change we are presently experiencing is a much, much more accelerated change than that of the early Holocene.

Wake Up People! This is not “Fake News” or a Chinese Hoax. The so-called “Political Right” denies Man-Made Climate Change, but the Green New Deal is also filled with idiots and misinformation like the Conservative right. Cow farts, while they may be a contributing factor, are not the cause of global warming. It is People! Too many of us!

Now, I’m not proposing anything radical, no thinning of the Population, but by God we have to scale back. Human over-population is the heart of the Problem! We have the technology in birth control so that there should not be a single unwanted child born in this world. If humans will limit themselves



▲ Year-round Spring



Spiral Petroglyph. ►
Ever since I was a lad of 14 when I first came out to the Southwest, I was told that spirals were a symbol of water and springs. I have hiked around this spring many times and yet never noticed this spiral petroglyph till Greta and Izzy brought it to my attention. Note: the lightning-snake petroglyph just to the left.



Basalt stone artifacts, left in situ, including utilized flakes, and the ends of capers and knives. La Bajada culture.



Prehistoric Trailhead



to the number of children they really want and can care for, over time we can reduce the Population. If we, as a Species, decrease our green house gas emissions by 20%, but increase our population by 20%, we have not made any progress. A fourteen or fifteen year old girl and boy who get knocked up because of raging hormones; or a girl or woman who is raped (especially if the heinous crime is by a family member) is not God's Will. God's Will is not the extinction of all His/Her wondrous and marvelous Creations because Man wants to Fuck the World into oblivion. Was the Will of God written down by a bunch of sheep herders in the Middle East some 2,500 years ago? Or is God's Will, as I believe, actually His/Her creation of this beautiful Planet. Why do we Humans seem so hell-bent on destroying it?

When I was born in 1954, the World Population was roughly 2.7 Billion and the population of

Wild African Elephants, *Loxodonta africana*, was about 2.5 Million. This was down from 10.3 Million in 1900. Today, the World Population is 7.8 Billion and the population of Wild African Elephants is a mere 415,000. Earlier in this story, we saw a correlation between Paleo man populations and Mastodon populations 12,000 years ago. Even if they stopped poaching present day Elephants there is just not enough habitat for them to live and their populations to increase. Parks and preserves are the new Zoos.

Well Fellow Seekers, fear not, for this is all just a blink of the eye in geologic time. No matter what we do to destroy this planet, some new form of life will eventually crawl out of the slime and start evolution all over again, but how sad if we destroy the paradise we have now.



Stone circles. These rock piles and stone circle are probably the rocks used to weigh down the edges of hide wickiups. La Bajada Culture.





Greta and Izzy sniff out the Past

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