



The Four Stages of Human Culture

This reference sheet outlines some of the major features of the four stages of human culture in terms of global population, contacts between different peoples, technological developments, use of natural resources, and impact of the natural environment.

Stage 1: Hunting and Gathering

The first, and by far the longest, stage of human culture is the hunting and gathering stage. See the graph at the end of this reference sheet.

Population

Groups of people living together in small scattered groups. These groups have only regional contact with other groups.

Distinguishing Features

The small groups subsist by hunting birds and animals, by fishing, and by gathering seeds, fruits, and plant roots. They probably move from place to place within the local region according to seasonal variations in food supplies.

Hunters and gatherers use natural materials such as fur, hide, feathers, and bark to make clothing. They live under rock overhangs, in caves, or in simple shelters made from branches, mud, and leaves. Their few tools and implements are simply made and easily replaced. They use fire for cooking and making pottery. There may also be the beginnings of the domestication of animals for food and/or beasts of burden.

Examples:

Historical _____

Contemporary _____

Stage 2: Agrarian

This stage probably began around 8000 B.C. and is still widespread today.

Population

In this stage, populations are concentrated along river valleys and broad plains where the soil is rich and fertile.

Distinguishing Features

Cultivation of native plants (e.g., wheat, barley, rice, millet, and corn). Later, native plants are cross-bred to develop hardier, more productive seeds. More produce, coupled with the domestication of animals such as dogs, sheep, goats, camels, and horses, means there is a surplus of food.

There is also some transformation of the landscape – clearing forests to make fields for crops; building of terraces on the side of hills to make fields for crops; diverting rivers and digging irrigation ditches; levelling hills for ceremonial spaces and buildings; raising mounds to build on; and mining for ores.

Division of Labour

There is a development in writing, laws, and governments during this stage. Cities grow up and there is some conquest of territory, giving birth to a widespread civilization. Exploration of other parts of the world means intercontinental contacts and trade, and the establishment of nations and empires.

Technology

Technology that contributed to the development of the agrarian societies include the wheel, the plough, the loom, firearms, and navigational devices.

Natural Resources

Major natural resources are readily available and accessible. There is fertile soil for crops, making pottery, and building material. There is wood for fire, for making tools, ships, wagons, and shelters. There is ample water to irrigate crops; stone for buildings and tools; and metals for tools and decorative (religious) objects.

Energy

Energy is mainly from renewable resources such as the water and wind, as well as the strength of humans and animals.

Examples

Historical _____

Contemporary _____

Stage 3: Industrial

This stage of culture began in the 18th century.

Population

During this stage, the global population increases at a faster rate than before. There is rapid growth of cities and urban population.

Distinguishing Features

There is widespread use of machines to do the work formerly done by animals and people. There is controlled use of fire (combustion) in manufacturing and transportation. There is mass production of goods, a world-wide transportation network, economic and political contacts, and conflict and warfare on a global scale.

Technology

Major technological advances in this stage include the steam engine, machines in all fields of manufacturing, automobiles, aircraft, electricity, telephone, radio and television, nuclear weapons and energy, steel, concrete, synthetic fibres and plastics, fertilizers, pesticides, and medicinal drugs.

Natural Resources

Exploitation of major natural resources involves machinery and expenditure of energy (fuel for machines); timber; coal, oil, and natural gas; minerals, metals, and chemicals; agricultural lands need fertilizers; drinking water has to be treated before use.

Energy

Major energy sources are non-renewable fossil fuels.

Examples

Stage 4: Post-Industrial

Began in the last quarter of the 20th century.

Population

Global population increasing exponentially. Nearly all habitable or arable land is occupied or used. Growth of "mega-cities."

Distinguishing Features

Instant communications possible all over the globe; almost universal awareness of dominant cultural features (e.g., brand name consumer products, entertainment stars, political figures); world-wide economic and political system; declining number of people employed in agriculture and industry; increasing cost of maintaining agricultural productivity; growing awareness of threats to global environmental system.

Negative impacts of human activities on natural environment become apparent (e.g., desertification, soil degradation, acid rain, hole in ozone layer, global warming).

Technology

Major inventions include computers; space satellites, remote-sensing systems; robots.

Energy

Large population creates greater dependence than ever on non-renewable fossil fuels.

Examples

