

Encyclopedic Entry

herding

pastoralism, mustering, droving

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Herding is the practice of caring for **roaming** groups of **livestock** over a large area. Herding developed about 10,000 years ago, as **prehistoric** hunters **domesticated** wild animals such as sheep and goats. Hunters learned that by controlling animals they once pursued, they could have reliable sources of **meat**, **milk** and milk products, and **hides** for tents and clothing.

Many animals naturally live and travel together in groups called **herds**. Goats, sheep, and llamas, for instance, live in herds as a form of protection. They move from one **fertile grassland** to another without an organized direction.

Predators such as lions, wolves, and coyotes pose major risks to domestic herds. **Herders** have traditionally provided protection for the animals. Herders also keep the herd together and guide it toward the most fertile grassland.

Herders often specialize in a particular type of livestock. **Shepherds**, for instance, herd and tend to flocks of sheep. **Goatherds** tend to goats, and **swineherds** to pigs and hogs.

Herders who tend to **cattle** were once called cowherds. Most cowherds are now known as **cowboys**. In Australia and New Zealand, cowboys are called **jackaroos** and **jillaroots**. In Latin America, they are known as **vaqueros**.

Herders often use **herding dogs** to help them tend their herd. Herding dogs have been bred to respond to the whistle or other commands of the herder. They keep a herd of sheep, goats, or cattle together. Herding dogs, such as kelpies and koolies, can also guide herds through dangerous **terrain**. Herding dogs are so skilled and **efficient** that they often participate in competitions. At these competitions, called trials, herding dogs move animals around an enclosure, through a series of fences and gates.

Larger dogs are often used by herders as **livestock guardian dogs**. These dogs, such as Great Pyrenees, have been bred to protect herds, usually sheep and goats, from predators such as wolves and coyotes. In Africa, livestock guardian dogs such as Anatolians protect domestic herds from lions and cheetahs.

Herding often takes place in **transition zones**, where land is not fertile enough for intensive **farming**. Animals can live on the **forage** of these grasslands, while people cannot.

Nomadic Herding

There are several different types of herding. One of the most ancient forms of herding is **nomadic** herding. Nomadic herders roam in small tribal or extended family groups and have no home base. Nomads live in **arid** and semiarid parts of Africa, Asia, and Europe, and in the **tundra** regions of Asia and Europe.

In Africa, nomads herd cattle, goats, sheep, and camels. In the tundra, they usually herd domesticated reindeer. Other animals managed by nomadic herders include horses, musk-oxen, and yaks. For many nomads, their herds provide meat, milk, and hides for their own use, as well as for [trade](#).

Nomadic herding is sometimes considered a form of [subsistence agriculture](#). It actually is not. Subsistence farmers grow and harvest [crops](#) mostly for their immediate family and community. Unlike subsistence farmers, herders are traditionally [wage-earners](#): They sell their herds' materials for goods and services, or herd other people's animals for a [fee](#). Often, this trade is part of the [informal economy](#)—not accounted for by the [government](#) of a region. In Africa, the [United Nations](#) estimates that herders are responsible for more than \$100 million in [economic](#) activity every year.

The [Fulani](#) people of Nigeria have long been nomadic herders. They move with their cattle from one grazing area to another. The cattle feed on [scrub](#) and [grasses](#) in land unsuitable for farming. The Fulani rely on cattle for milk, but rarely [slaughter](#) the animals for meat.

Nomadic herding as a way of life is declining because of [natural disasters](#) such as [droughts](#), loss of land area due to [development](#) and [degradation](#), and pressure from governments to lead a settled existence.

Semi-Nomadic Herding

[Semi-nomadic](#) herders live a more settled life than nomads, but still follow their herds for long periods of time. Millions of Mongolians, for example, have been semi-nomadic herders for thousands of years. They traditionally herd sheep, goats, horses, and Bactrian camels. Today, about a quarter of Mongolia's population continues to live a semi-nomadic herding lifestyle.

Semi-nomadic herders can be associated with invasions. The Mongol leader [Genghis Khan conquered](#) almost all of Asia by uniting various nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes in the 1200s. Their [familiarity](#) with [vast](#) tracks of land, and living in [sparse](#) conditions for long periods of time, made these herders ideally suited to moving across varied terrain.

The [Sami](#) are semi-nomadic herders [indigenous](#) to the [Arctic](#). They live throughout northern Norway, Sweden, Finland, and on the Kola Peninsula of Russia. For centuries, the Sami have herded reindeer as a [principal](#) means of [livelihood](#), [supplemented](#) by fishing and trapping.

Development has made it difficult for semi-nomadic herders to sustain their traditional way of life. State and national [borders](#), for example, have divided traditional Sami land. Industries like [timber](#) and [mining](#) have reduced grazing land. Today, some laws exist to protect the Sami and their rights to use the land, but conflicts still exist.

Transhumance

Another type of herding is called [transhumance](#). Transhumance herders follow a [seasonal](#) migration pattern, usually moving to cool [highlands](#) in the summer and warmer [lowlands](#) in the winter. Unlike nomads, these herders move between the same two locations, where they have permanent [settlements](#).

Transhumance has had an [enormous](#) impact on the [landscape](#). In the European Alps, for instance, thousands of years of transhumance have transformed [foothill](#) forests into [alpine pastures](#). Swiss and German herders traditionally led sheep, cattle, and pigs to pastures at elevations above 2,000 meters (6,562 feet).

Transhumance in the Alps actually involved three herding grounds. The village floor, at the lowest elevation, was where livestock were kept sheltered during the cold and snowy winter months. Shepherds led herds to the middle pastures during the spring. During the summer and fall, shepherds led sheep and cattle to the high alpine

pastures, while pigs stayed in the middle area.

Transhumance is still widely practiced throughout agricultural communities in Switzerland, Germany, Austria, Italy, and Slovenia.

The Kirghiz horsemen of Central Asia used to [migrate](#) between regions of eastern Afghanistan, western China, and southern Tajikistan with their herds of goats, yaks, and camels. They would spend their winters in the lower valleys of China or Tajikistan, moving to high mountain grasslands in the summer.

When China restricted its borders to travelers, the Kirghiz transhumance herders lost the ability to summer in Chinese mountain valleys. While some Kirghiz have settled into [sedentary](#) lives in other regions, a small group still upholds their traditional lifestyle in the remote, [austere Wakhan Corridor](#) of Afghanistan.

Ranches

Most large-scale livestock herds today live on [ranches](#). [Ranching](#) involves raising livestock on a single, large tract of land. Ranches are common in Australia and New Zealand, the western United States, Argentina, and Brazil. Ranchers don't migrate the way nomadic or transhumance herders do.

However, throughout most of the 1800s, ranchers in the United States set their cattle and sheep loose to roam the [prairie](#) as herds. Most of the grazing land was owned by the government, not individual ranchers. This was the so-called "[open range](#)." Twice a year, cowboys would round up cattle for [branding](#) (in spring) and for gathering for sale (in autumn). [Round-ups](#) are still a part of ranching culture, but livestock now roam on private land.

Herding and Land Use

Herders maintain [complex maps](#) of the area where their herds graze. These maps include seasonal [weather patterns](#); partnerships or conflicts with other herders, ranchers, or landowners; and [soil](#) quality. Herders can be excellent resources for [data](#) about the agricultural fertility of an area.

A herder's vast knowledge is threatened by the pressure to [conform](#) to modern society. Permanent residence allows members of a community to have access to [education](#) and [health care](#) facilities. It also affords members a greater choice in their professional and personal lives.

However, the complex social structure of herding communities is lost as they are [absorbed](#) into mainstream culture. Unique [language](#) and customs become [outdated](#) and not useful in settled [urban](#) or [suburban](#) life.

The [Bedouin](#) people of the Arabian Peninsula and the Middle East, for example, are almost entirely semi-nomadic and settled. Prior to the 20th century, Bedouins were mostly nomads, herding sheep and goats. A series of droughts in the 1960s throughout Western Asia limited fertile areas. [Oil](#) production in Egypt and Saudi Arabia further limited land available for grazing.

More importantly, however, Bedouins sought a better standard of living. Schools, health-care facilities, law enforcement, and social opportunities are usually greater in settled areas than through herding lifestyles.

VOCABULARY

Term	Part of Speech	Definition
absorb	verb	to soak up.

alpine	<i>adjective</i>	having to do with mountains.
Arctic	<i>noun</i>	region at Earth's extreme north, encompassed by the Arctic Circle.
arid	<i>adjective</i>	dry.
austere	<i>adjective</i>	severe, simple, or lacking in luxury.
barbed wire	<i>noun</i>	twisted metal with sharpened points, often used for fences.
Bedouin	<i>noun, adjective</i>	people and culture native to the Arabian Peninsula, Middle East, and North Africa.
border	<i>noun</i>	natural or artificial line separating two pieces of land.
branding	<i>noun</i>	marketing or sales process that creates a unique reputation for a product.
breed	<i>verb</i>	to produce offspring.
cattle	<i>noun</i>	cows and oxen.
complex	<i>adjective</i>	complicated.
conform	<i>verb</i>	to comply or act according to the accepted standard.
conquer	<i>verb</i>	to overcome an enemy or obstacle.
cowboy	<i>noun</i>	person who herds cattle on a ranch, usually on a horse.
crop	<i>noun</i>	agricultural produce.
custom	<i>noun</i>	a way of doing things that has been handed down from one generation to the next.
data	<i>plural noun</i>	(singular: datum) information collected during a scientific study.
degradation	<i>noun</i>	breaking down.
development	<i>noun</i>	construction or preparation of land for housing, industry, or agriculture.
domesticate	<i>verb</i>	to tame or adapt for human use.
drought	<i>noun</i>	period of greatly reduced precipitation.
economic	<i>adjective</i>	having to do with money.
education	<i>noun</i>	process of acquiring knowledge and critical-thinking skills.
efficient	<i>adjective</i>	performing a task with skill and minimal waste.
elevation	<i>noun</i>	height above or below sea level.
enclosure	<i>noun</i>	area surrounded by a wall, fence, or other physical boundary.
enormous	<i>adjective</i>	very large.
familiar	<i>adjective</i>	well-known.
farming	<i>noun</i>	the art, science, and business of cultivating the land for growing crops.
fee	<i>noun</i>	price or cost.
fertile	<i>adjective</i>	able to produce crops or sustain agriculture.
foothill	<i>noun</i>	hill at the base of a mountain.
forage	<i>noun</i>	fodder, or food for horses or cattle.

forest	<i>noun</i>	ecosystem filled with trees and underbrush.
Fulani	<i>noun, adjective</i>	nomadic herders of northern Nigeria. Also known as the Fula.
Genghis Khan	<i>noun</i>	(1162-1227) founder of the Mongol empire.
goatherd	<i>noun</i>	herder who tends to goats.
government	<i>noun</i>	system or order of a nation, state, or other political unit.
grass	<i>noun</i>	type of plant with narrow leaves.
grassland	<i>noun</i>	ecosystem with large, flat areas of grasses.
harvest	<i>noun</i>	the gathering and collection of crops, including both plants and animals.
health care	<i>noun</i>	system for addressing the physical health of a population.
herd	<i>noun</i>	group of animals.
herder	<i>noun</i>	person who controls and takes responsibility for a group of animals such as sheep, cattle, or horses.
herding	<i>noun</i>	practice of caring for roaming groups of livestock over a large area.
herding dog	<i>noun</i>	dog bred to keep a herd of livestock safe and together.
hide	<i>noun</i>	leather skin of an animal.
highlands	<i>plural noun</i>	plateau or elevated region of land.
homestead	<i>noun</i>	area of land including a dwelling and any outbuildings, such as barns.
indigenous	<i>adjective</i>	native to or characteristic of a specific place.
informal economy	<i>noun</i>	exchange of goods and services where taxes are not paid to the government, or services are illegal, such as drugs. Also called the black market.
jackaroo	<i>noun</i>	Australian cowboy.
jillaroo	<i>noun</i>	Australian cowgirl.
landscape	<i>noun</i>	the geographic features of a region.
language	<i>noun</i>	set of sounds, gestures, or symbols that allows people to communicate.
Latin America	<i>noun</i>	South America, Central America, the Caribbean, and Mexico.
Levant	<i>noun</i>	area bordering the eastern Mediterranean Sea, including the nations of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel.
livelihood	<i>noun</i>	ability to economically support oneself.
livestock	<i>noun, plural noun</i>	animals raised for sale and profit.
livestock guardian dog	<i>noun</i>	dog bred to protect livestock herds from predators.
lowland	<i>noun</i>	slow-flowing river ecosystem usually found in lower altitudes.
map	<i>noun</i>	symbolic representation of selected characteristics of a place, usually drawn on a flat surface.
meat	<i>noun</i>	animal flesh eaten as food.
migrate	<i>verb</i>	to move from one place or activity to another.

migration pattern	<i>noun</i>	predictable movements, in time and space, of a group of animals or people.
milk	<i>noun</i>	white liquid produced by female mammals to feed their young.
mining	<i>noun</i>	process of extracting ore from the Earth.
natural disaster	<i>noun</i>	an event occurring naturally that has large-scale effects on the environment and people, such as a volcano, earthquake, or hurricane.
nomadic	<i>adjective</i>	having to do with a way of life lacking permanent settlement.
oil	<i>noun</i>	fossil fuel formed from the remains of marine plants and animals. Also known as petroleum or crude oil.
open range	<i>noun</i>	large area owned by the government where many owners' livestock may graze, usually referring to the situation in the late 1800s in the western United States.
outdated	<i>adjective</i>	no longer useful.
overgrazing	<i>noun</i>	process of too many animals feeding on one area of pasture or grassland.
pasture	<i>noun</i>	type of agricultural land used for grazing livestock.
prairie	<i>noun</i>	large grassland; usually associated with the Mississippi River Valley in the United States.
predator	<i>noun</i>	animal that hunts other animals for food.
prehistoric	<i>adjective</i>	period of time that occurred before the invention of written records.
principal	<i>adjective</i>	leading or dominant.
ranch	<i>noun</i>	large farm on which livestock are raised.
ranching	<i>noun</i>	practice of raising livestock for human use, such as food or clothing.
region	<i>noun</i>	any area on the Earth with one or more common characteristics. Regions are the basic units of geography.
reliable	<i>adjective</i>	dependable or consistent.
roam	<i>verb</i>	to wander or travel over a wide area without a specific destination.
round-up	<i>noun</i>	gathering of all the livestock on a ranch. Also called a muster.
Sami	<i>noun</i>	people and culture native to northern Scandinavia.
savanna	<i>noun</i>	type of tropical grassland with scattered trees.
scrub	<i>noun</i>	area of arid grassland covered with low-lying trees and bushes.
seasonal	<i>adjective</i>	likely to change with the seasons.
sedentary	<i>adjective</i>	staying in one place.
semiarid climate	<i>noun</i>	(dry climate) region that receives between 25 and 50 centimeters (10-20 inches) of rainfall every year.
semi-nomadic	<i>adjective</i>	people or communities who follow their food source for long periods of time, but can also live settled lives.
settlement	<i>noun</i>	community or village.
shepherd	<i>noun</i>	herder who tends to sheep.

slaughter	<i>verb</i>	to kill and butcher an animal for food.
soil	<i>noun</i>	top layer of the Earth's surface where plants can grow.
sparse	<i>adjective</i>	scattered and few in number.
stalk	<i>verb</i>	to pursue or approach prey or an enemy.
subsistence agriculture	<i>noun</i>	type of agriculture in which farmers grow crops or raise livestock for personal consumption, not sale.
suburb	<i>noun</i>	geographic area, mostly residential, just outside the borders of an urban area.
supplement	<i>verb</i>	to increase or add to.
swineherd	<i>noun</i>	herder who tends to pigs and hogs.
terrain	<i>noun</i>	topographic features of an area.
timber	<i>noun</i>	wood in an unfinished form, either trees or logs.
trade	<i>noun</i>	buying, selling, or exchanging of goods and services.
transhumance	<i>noun</i>	seasonal migration of livestock and herders between warm valleys and cool foothills.
transition zone	<i>noun</i>	area between two natural or artificial regions.
tribe	<i>noun</i>	community made of one or several family groups sharing a common culture.
tundra	<i>noun</i>	cold, treeless region in Arctic and Antarctic climates.
unique	<i>adjective</i>	one of a kind.
United Nations	<i>noun</i>	international organization that works for peace, security and cooperation.
urban	<i>adjective</i>	having to do with city life.
valley	<i>noun</i>	depression in the Earth between hills.
vaquero	<i>noun</i>	Latin American cowboy.
vast	<i>adjective</i>	huge and spread out.
wage	<i>noun</i>	money or goods traded for work or service performed.
Wakhan Corridor	<i>noun</i>	area of northeastern Afghanistan that borders China.
water rights	<i>plural noun</i>	right of a consumer (person, business, or government) to use water from a specific source. Sometimes, water rights include the amount of water a consumer is allowed to use.
weather pattern	<i>noun</i>	repeating or predictable changes in the Earth's atmosphere, such as winds, precipitation, and temperatures.

For Further Exploration

Audio & Video

- National Geographic Channel: Birth of the Herding Dog
- Beanjili: Working Sheepdogs in New Zealand

Websites

- National Geographic News: Gene Study Traces Cattle Herding in Africa



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