

# Reading Prehistoric Human Tracks

Andreas Pastoors • Tilman Lenssen-Erz  
Editors

# Reading Prehistoric Human Tracks

Methods & Material



*Editors*

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# Foreword

It is a great honour and pleasure for me to congratulate the organizers of this conference and its volume for having brought forward such an innovative approach and topic. It was a fantastic idea to invite expert trackers for an international conference on human tracks, to offer them the possibility to meet other trackers from hunter-gatherer communities around the globe, and to open pathways for including indigenous experts into archaeological research. This shows that there is a kind of knowledge beyond the academic knowledge that is able to enrich science.

This conference was somehow an experiment, but a very successful one. To deal with new categories of knowledge beyond the classical western academic knowledge is extremely challenging, and it is part of the intangible heritage of mankind. The Humboldt Forum in Berlin will become a place where cultures from all over the world shall meet and get into exchange, where a new dialogue between cultures can be developed by cooperation and by co-productions, and where we want to define a new understanding of shared heritage and shared history. This is not only a great challenge, but also a unique chance.

Traditional or indigenous knowledge is so important, because these knowledge systems are embedded in the cultural traditions of regional, indigenous, or local communities, it is knowledge acquired over many generations, it is knowledge mostly about traditional technologies of subsistence, ecological knowledge, traditional medicine, climate etc., and it is generally based on accumulations of empirical observation and on interaction with the environment. This traditional knowledge may distinguish one community from another, it takes on personal and spiritual meanings, and it can reflect the community's interests.

Communities depend sometimes on their traditional knowledge, especially on environmental issues, their knowledge is bound to ancestors and ancestral lands, and it is embedded in a cosmology and therefore has a spiritual component, too. Communities have strong traditions of ownership or custodianship over knowledge, the misuse of knowledge may be offensive to traditions, and they prevent the patenting of traditional knowledge by not expressing consent.

In the broader context traditional knowledge has to be treated in the same way as other traditional cultural expressions. The World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) interprets traditional knowledge as any form of artistic and literary expression in which traditional culture and knowledge are embodied. This knowledge is transmitted from one generation to the next, and it includes handmade textiles, paintings, stories, legends, ceremonies, music, songs, rhythms and dance.

During the preparation of the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, it is interesting that the inclusion of indigenous knowledge becomes more and more important and interesting. Years ago we started the project “Sharing knowledge” with the Indigenous University of Tauca in Venezuela, which in the meantime expanded into neighbouring regions of Brazil and Colombia. This cooperation makes visible the dynamics and presence of indigenous perspectives on ethnographic objects, it helps in writing the history of the collections again by including the indigenous perspective. Through an online-platform the future visitor of the Humboldt Forum gets first-hand knowledge from the indigenous perspective on the objects, and not ethnologists or anthropologists are speaking for the indigenous, but the indigenous speak for themselves, what we call multivocality. Ethnologists and anthropologists remain only in an intermediate position. This is a way of decolonizing perspectives by sharing the power of interpretation.

In these days we talk a lot about decolonizing museums and also decolonizing the archaeological practice. These questions are addressing issues of power of science and control of archaeological interpretation. We need participatory approaches, and we have to develop new methodologies and strategies of community participation. This kind of community engagement can be a new path into the future of archaeology in Africa and beyond. It also can help in reacting towards rapid environmental changes affecting ecosystems by engaging communities throughout all levels of research.

But local communities demand to get something back, e.g. the San people in Southern Africa, Inuit in Alaska, First Nations in Canada, or Aborigines in Australia. They defined codes of ethics for researchers wishing to study their culture, their knowledge, their genes or their heritage. They have to be treated respectfully without publishing insulting information, communities wish to read and check results before publication to avoid misunderstandings, and they have to have free access to research data.

Dealing with indigenous knowledge can help us a lot to learn more about a distant past, but it is also a unique chance to broaden our understanding of the plurality of cultures today, and that there are very different categories of knowledge. More knowledge, however, is an important step towards more tolerance and respect for other cultures and different traditions, what maybe today is more important than ever.

President of the Stiftung Preussischer  
Kulturbesitz, Berlin, Germany  
December 2019

Hermann Parzinger

# Preface

In May 2017 a conference was hosted at the University of Cologne and the Neanderthal Museum that covered the topic of prehistoric human tracks in a truly global perspective: it convened experts from five continents as well as from various disciplines for scientific presentations. Besides the usual academic presentations in a lecture hall a full day was dedicated to discussing with and listening to indigenous tracking experts from Australia, Canada and Namibia – around a fire outside. These talks and practical demonstrations of track reading by the indigenous tracking experts on a track field with human footprints aimed at enabling western scholars to get a glimpse of the methodological basics of expert tracking. For indigenous trackers it is common practice not only to discriminate male from female footprints but they can also distinguish age classes of adult persons – a differentiation western science including orthopaedics is unable to achieve. This knowledge now entered into a discourse with scientific approaches to glean information from human footprints.

Nearly all projects worldwide investigating human tracks in archaeological context were present at the conference, covering a time span from the earliest footprints in Laetoli to Neolithic ones on the Danish coast. Methodological aspects presented a range from collaboration with indigenous trackers to visualizations based on state of the art scanning technology. This extraordinary meeting with its first time ever encounter of all kinds of human ways of knowing on an archaeological source material – an under-researched one at that – called for an dissemination beyond the closed circle of experts who were present at the conference. The idea of capturing all this knowledge in a book was cogent and in the process of production it showed that further aspects that were not represented at the conference, should still be included so that here we also present authors who did not contribute to the conference. Through this selection of authors for the first time the most important sites which were found worldwide, will be published in a single publication.

This and the broad scope of methodological diversity will make the book a rewarding read for readers from a wide range of fields of knowing. The analysis of human tracks by representatives of anthropological, statistical and traditional

approaches feature the multi-layered methods available for the analysis of human tracks and will appeal to students, scholars and also laypeople with an interest in archaeologies, anthropology, social anthropology, palaeontology, cognitive science, cultural science, ichnology and sports science. This book is to show that progress in science and enlightenment on the one hand requires the development of ever new methods in order to enhance the ability for fine resolution in measurement and interpretation of phenomena, but on the other hand it also shows that recourse to knowledge and skills that may have been our human toolkit throughout our species' history can point out where we should get at with our scientific approaches.

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February 2020

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