

Archeological History of the Cumberland-Green Bioregion

By Eric Lewis

Some twenty-five years ago a group of people sat down and began to divide up the earth into “bite-size” pieces. If we were to properly care for our planet, and to take ownership of it, we needed to figure out a new organizational plan. Most countries and even most states are too big to really get a handle on the landscape and its inhabitants, its culture and its history. And most political boundaries have little to do with natural characteristics or with cultural affinities. So this group put lines on maps that correspond to watersheds and geologic provinces. These have become the Bioregions of Planet Earth.

The Cumberland-Green Bioregion takes its name from the Cumberland River in Tennessee and the Green River in Kentucky. It encompasses the Nashville Basin and the Highland Rim that surrounds it and runs from southern Kentucky into northern Alabama. Within its boundaries is a land filled with an abundance of plant and animal life and a rich cultural history. The climate of our Bioregion is temperate with an average rainfall of 45 inches, giving rise to an oak/hickory forest cover and grasslands. We are blessed with a maze of springs, streams, lakes, and rivers that have carved out the landscape and given rise to our “hills and hollers”, our broad fertile valleys, waterfalls, steep cliffs, and many caves. Unlike our cousins in the Southwest US, we find water virtually everywhere, and this makes it possible to support a huge range of plant and animal life.

Native Americans first came to the Bioregion some 12,000 years ago towards the end of the last Ice Age when they followed mammoth and other big game into the spruce and fir forests of the area. These Paleo-Indian hunters camped in caves and rock overhangs and left behind distinctive arrow heads and spear points. As the climate warmed and the forest changed to deciduous, deer and elk became prevalent. Somewhere between 3,000 and 900 BC the Archaic Indians began to plant squash and gourds, thus supplying a year-round food supply and allowing for permanent settlements. The Woodland period, which lasted until about 900 AD, saw the introduction of pottery, burial mounds, and more organized societies of towns with governments. During the Woodland period, which lasted until the coming of the Europeans in the 16th Century, farming became more sophisticated, the population increased, towns grew larger, labor became specialized, and trade with other areas spread.

Evidence of all these societies may be found throughout the Bioregion, from the great mound complexes along the rivers to the arrow heads that rise to the surface after a rain, to the petroglyphs found in caves on cliff faces. The richness of our bioregion’s archeological history can also be found in more recent times in the early European settlements, the furnaces and forges of the Iron Age, and the many battle sites of the Civil War. Because of the plentiful rainfall, the good soil, and the abundance of wildlife, the Cumberland Green Bioregion has spawned human habitation for thousands of years and the evidence left behind is a treasure for us to find.

Eric is the Administrator of the Cumberland Green Bioregional Council. This article has been provided courtesy of the Green Living Journal, a project of the Center for Holistic Ecology and the Cumberland Green Bioregional Council.