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Response Essay #1: Chimpanzees and Termite Fishing

Suzuki, Kuroda, and Nishihara post their observations on chimpanzees in the Ndoki forest and how they used two different types of sticks for “termite fishing”, that is digging termites from their mounds so the chimpanzees can eat them. What’s unique about this behavior is that the chimpanzees are using more than one type of tool to get the termites. In that specific case, having a toolset was more advantageous than just using one type of tool at a time.

Why would chimpanzees use a toolset as opposed to just one tool? For one answer, it provides an obvious survival advantage: they can eat more termites at a time. Just using one stick could mean that the sticks used would break more often, and they would have to waste time going out to get more sticks.

I do agree with the information being presented in the study, because I find it makes logical sense. Even though some portions of the study did not have many observations because sometimes the chimpanzees would startle when they saw the researchers, I think from the surrounding evidence that they had gathered from around the termite mounds that the researchers had sufficient proof to explain their observations.

However, one thing I found interesting about the study was how the chimpanzees used the “perforating sticks”. According to the study, while the chimpanzees did use the sticks to punch small holes in the termite mounds, it seemed unlikely that they would use the sticks to break open the mound entirely. It’s possible that in addition to punching holes in the termite mounds, they left the sticks in bigger holes made by aardvarks to either dig deeper into the mound for more termites, or to leave an opening in the mound when the termites attempt to close the hole.

As for what this means for our studies in anthropology? For one, humans are considered to be a part of the Primate order alongside chimpanzees. So, by studying chimpanzee behavior, we could potentially relate these findings to how we as humans evolved. Specifically, it could support telling us how or why we began to use different types of tools. Since little is known about the stone tools that we made from percussion flaking in the prehistoric era, we could look to how these wooden tools were used to possibly fill in the blanks.