

Our Ocean Backyard — *Santa Cruz Sentinel* columns by Gary Griggs, Director, Institute of Marine Sciences, UC Santa Cruz.

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Our Earliest Coastal Residents

Santa Cruz has a large number of very distinct and interesting groups of people, but when it comes to residency, there often seems to be two major categories, the long-term residents and those who came relatively recently. This is sometimes a subject of some discussion or debate, however, as those who arrived four or five years ago often consider themselves long-timers.

In the big picture of Santa Cruz, or the coast of California for that matter, everyone is an immigrant, some just arrived a lot later than others. There are diaries, journals and volumes written by those who came over the past 200 or so years, but the first arrivals didn't leave a lot of information behind - no letters or books.

Their history is bit sketchy, in fact it's real sketchy. So much so that the people who study these things don't usually agree on exactly how they got here, or even when. The jury seems to still be out on a lot of the details.

Immigrants to California throughout its history of human occupation have arrived from all points of the compass: north, south, east and west. Some passed through and kept going, but most fell hard for the coast of California and decided it was more to their liking than wherever they were before.

For the same reasons that people around the planet have been drawn to coastal regions, many of California's settlers often ended up near the coast, and still do in large numbers. Today, about two-thirds of our state's population, about 26 million of us, live in coastal counties, and the number continues to increase with every census, along with property values and home prices.

Archaeologists tend to be a feisty lot. While they had reached a truce of sorts for several decades, and some general agreement that the first humans arrived in the Americas from Siberia across a land bridge near the end of the last Ice Age, things have degenerated a bit in recent years. At that time, sea level was 350-400 feet lower as a result of about 10 million cubic miles of ocean water being spread across large areas of the northern hemisphere as ice sheets and glaciers.

Scholars generally agree that the peopling of the Americas took place sometime in the past 25,000 years. The most accepted view at the moment is that a wave of hunters crossed into the New World from Siberia, perhaps in pursuit of large game. The lower Ice Age sea level exposed a land bridge that made the crossing relatively easy.

Some of the first documented and later Carbon-14 dated remains of human activity were found in the 1920s near Clovis, New Mexico. These early inhabitants seemed to have settled down here about 13,000 years ago. The Clovis site and the associated projectile points were the gold standard for decades, the Rosetta stone, and any competing theory was usually quickly discredited or not given much credence. There was a lot at stake here in Clovis.

Archaeologists have been down on their hands and knees in the dirt across the Americas ever since, however. The evidence being uncovered more recently is making it increasingly clear that the Clovis site was not the earliest human record in the Americas, and that the history and migration rate was likely far more complex than initially envisioned.

In the late 1970s, an American archaeologist and his Chilean colleagues began excavating what they thought might be an ancient settlement on a creek bank at Monte Verde, in southern Chile. Radiocarbon dating of organic material collected from the ruins of a large tent-like structure indicated that the site was 14,800 years old, predating Clovis finds by nearly 2,000 years. This was very big news in our understanding of early humans in the Americas.

Mastodons were apparently butchered nearby, and cordage, stone choppers, augers, and wooden planks were preserved in an adjacent bog, along with plant remains, edible seeds and traces of wild potatoes. While some have questioned the evidence from the site, there is general agreement that humans must have arrived in the Americas sooner than originally thought and also traveled farther and faster. To the disappointment of many archaeologists who had staked their reputations on Clovis, the glow was fading.