

History of the Land Bridge Theory

By U.S. National Park Service, adapted by Newsela staff on 09.07.17

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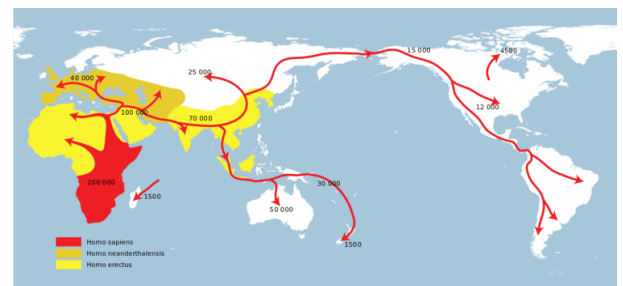
A satellite image of the Bering Strait. Cape Dezhnev, Russia, is on the left, the two Diomed Islands are in the middle and Cape Prince of Wales, Alaska, is on the right. Image by: NASA

People have lived in North America for at least 16,500 years. By the early 1800s, scientists began discussing the possibility of a land bridge that had connected Asia and North America thousands of years ago. The theory of a land bridge has fueled the imagination of explorers and scientists for centuries.

Early expeditions

In 1590, the Spanish missionary Fray Jose de Acosta was the first to suggest that a land bridge connected Asia to North America. Acosta believed that hunters from Asia had used it to cross into North America.

During the 18th century, Peter the Great, the Russian czar from 1682-1725, chartered an exploration of the eastern borders of the Russian Empire. He hired the Danish explorer Vitus Bering to lead an expedition in the Bering Strait region. Bering's two



voyages confirmed that there was land and even people across the water; people who had been trading and traveling across the Bering Strait for thousands of years.

The second explorer to confirm the existence of present-day Alaska was the Englishman Captain James Cook. On his 1778 expedition, he produced detailed maps of the Alaskan coast. The outside world learned about the Bering Strait region from the results of his exploration. Soon, theories of human migration between Asia and North America began to gain strength.

Scientists confirm first Americans came from another place

The confirmation of a strait between Asia and North America fueled an interest in the possibility of a wide plain that might have connected the two continents. Beginning in the early 1800s, American scientists and naturalists started investigating archaeological sites on the coasts of the United States. Their findings suggested that the first people to live in North America had come to the continent from another place. But where? It wasn't until the mid-1920s that scientists would finally restart the search for evidence of how people came to North America.

Hopkins' groundbreaking discoveries

David M. Hopkins studied geology at the University of New Hampshire before accepting a position with the U.S. Geological Society in 1942. He worked with many scientists and researchers to make groundbreaking discoveries about the Bering Land Bridge.

The type of plants that grew on the land bridge had been questioned by scientists for years. Hopkins worked with three other scientists to confirm the age of plants frozen in a layer of ash from a volcanic eruption 18,000 years ago. Their findings confirmed that a greater variety of plants grew on the land bridge than originally believed.

To strengthen the concept of the Bering Land Bridge Theory, Hopkins reached out to scientists and researchers studying the Chukotka Peninsula. He brought their work to the attention of researchers and scientists studying the Seward Peninsula. His passion for the Bering Land Bridge did not just help create the Bering Land Bridge National Preserve. It has also built great interest in the Bering Land Bridge theory.

No one knows exactly when and how they came to Americas

In today's world, how people came to the Americas is still debated. As of 2008, findings suggest that a single population of modern humans migrated from southern Siberia as early as 30,000 years ago, and crossed over to the Americas 16,500 years ago. While this may represent the earliest migration, it was not the only one. Once the first humans made it over, it appears that several migrations took place over the next several millennia. The small amount of evidence available often conflicts. Some theories of the first Americans are still uncertain.

For years, it was thought the first Americans arrived about 13,500 years ago. But over the last 20 years, other theories have been proposed.

If the first Americans didn't travel to the continent over the Bering Land Bridge, where did they come from? When and how did they get here? In 1997, an archaeological site in Monte Verde, Chile, was discovered. This site dated back to 14,500 years ago. It also indicated that these humans settled much farther south than expected.

This finding brought up an interesting question. If humans settled in the Americas so much earlier than previously thought, is it possible that they reached the continent through a different route? One theory claims it is possible that the first Americans didn't cross the Bering Land Bridge at all. They didn't even travel by foot, but rather by boat across the Atlantic Ocean.

There are many challenges in studying the first Americans

Research and dating methods continue to improve. Other conclusions can be determined from the evidence we now have. Sites all around the country suggest that the earliest Americans dispersed throughout the continent at least 14,500 years ago.

In 2017, San Diego Natural History Museum paleontologist Tom Deméré claimed to have found evidence that humans reached California 130,000 years ago. A mastodon bone determined to be 130,000 years old had been crushed with a tool that Deméré believes only could have belonged to an early human. To date, however, additional evidence has not been found proving this claim.

Weaknesses in dating methods, artifacts, and genetics provide endless hurdles to overcome. But the study of the first Americans offers great opportunities to pioneer new discoveries in a field that still has not been completely studied. The theory of the first Americans crossing over the Bering Land Bridge remains possible. Thus, we continue to celebrate our distant past in the ways we protect and use our enduring resources.

Quiz

- 1 Which two of the following sentences from the article include CENTRAL ideas of it?
1. *By the early 1800s, scientists began discussing the possibility of a land bridge that had connected Asia and North America thousands of years ago.*
 2. *During the 18th century, Peter the Great, the Russian czar from 1682-1725, chartered an exploration of the eastern borders of the Russian Empire.*
 3. *The type of plants that grew on the land bridge had been questioned by scientists for years.*
 4. *In today's world, how people came to the Americas is still debated.*
- (A) 1 and 3
- (B) 1 and 4
- (C) 2 and 3
- (D) 2 and 4
- 2 Read the section "Scientists confirm first Americans came from another place."
- How is the CENTRAL idea developed in this section?
- (A) by illustrating the importance of archaeological sites farther south than expected
- (B) by describing the evidence that has been given to support the Bering Land Bridge theory
- (C) by emphasizing the idea that the first Americans have been studied for many years
- (D) by outlining the investigations and questions that led to the Bering Land Bridge theory
- 3 Why is the arrival of the first people in the Americas still debated?
- (A) because research and dating methods suggest the timeline of the Bering Land Bridge might not be correct
- (B) because evidence has been discovered that the first Americans actually traveled to the continent by boat
- (C) because Hopkins was unable to confirm the age of plants in a layer of volcanic ash from the Bering Strait
- (D) because many archaeologists believe that a land bridge from Siberia would have been impossible
- 4 What is the MOST LIKELY reason the author included the description of Tom Deméré's theory?
- (A) to elaborate on the types of studies that have cast doubt on the validity of the Bering Land Bridge theory in recent years
- (B) to emphasize that weaknesses in archaeological studies make the first arrival of people in the Americas uncertain
- (C) to introduce an argument in the archaeological community that surrounds the arrival of the first Americans
- (D) to illustrate the difficulty of finding evidence to support claims that the earliest Americans used tools to kill mastodons

Answer Key

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