

Earliest known archaeological evidence of Americans found in Monte Verde, Chile

[08ThursdayMay 2008](#)

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[Archaeology](#), [chile](#), [monte verde](#), [peopling of the americas](#), [radiocarbon dating](#)

[Monte Verde](#), Chile is a very interesting archaeological site. First discovered in 1976, the site is about 500 miles south of Santiago and has yielded artifacts of a small settlement of 20 to 30 people living in a dozen huts along a small creek. Aside from artifacts, a wide variety of midden has also been unearthed from the site indicating these people survived on extinct species of llama, [gomphotheres](#), shellfish, vegetables and nuts.



In 1979, [Tom Dillehay](#) conducted radiocarbon dating of the bones and charcoal found at Monte Verde. The results were shocking at the time. The dating of the organic materials was at 14,000 years before the present. This conflicted with other archaeological evidence of the settlement of North America, such as the artifacts that supported Clovis theory... none of which had dates earlier than 13,000 years ago. To have people living in Chile 14,000 years ago would have meant that people arrived in the Americas earlier than 13,000 years ago. Lots of people rejected the radiocarbon dating because of it challenged the Clovis theory. It wasn't until 1997 that archaeologists reviewed the evidence, visited the Monte Verde site, and approved of the date.

Since then, lots of other evidence, such as genetics and more artifacts have helped provide more understandings on the mode and tempo of the peopling of the Americas. I've covered some of the recent evidence. If you're interested in reviewing them, check out [this collection of blog posts related to the peopling of the Americas](#).

Today's *Science* has published a new report from Monte Verde, authored by Tom Dillehay and others. The paper, "[Monte Verde: Seaweed, Food, Medicine, and the Peopling of South America](#)," announces the discovery of the remains of nine species of seaweed and algae found

from hearths in Monte Verde. Radiocarbon dating of the layer yielded a date of 14,220 and 13,980 years ago... which is right in line with the 1979 dates.

The finding of seaweed and algae in Monte Verde is a curious one, and what makes this paper unique. See, Monte Verde is about 10 miles away from the ocean. The authors interpret that the seaweed and algae was of some value for the people of Monte Verde for them to haul it inshore... Perhaps it was used for food or medicine?

Who knows, really? What we can interpret from this evidence is that prehistoric people stuck to the shore. Sticking to the shore woulda made traveling throughout the Americas much more efficient, according to some scholars who subscribe to the [coastal migration hypothesis](#). The general view of this hypothesis is that the early immigrants would have spread down the coast much faster than they could move inland because they could exploit familiar coastal resources more readily and get much of their food from the sea. Not much evidence has been found to support this hypothesis, partially because sea levels are 200 feet or so lower 14,000 years ago than they are right now. Any seaside sites would have been covered up as the ice melted after the last ice age. Finding seaweed from site like Monte Verde indicates that 14,000 years ago people relied on some sea life, and kept relatively close to the shore even though they established a rather permanent settlement inland.

From my personal experience with hiking the Santa Cruz mountains as well as working at an archaeological site in the Monterey Bay, I too have seen evidence that prehistoric peoples were relying heavily on sea life for food. Often, I've found mussel shells deep within the forest. I have also seen how people were regularly hunting fur seals from a rookery.

Dillehay, T.D., Ramirez, C., Pino, M., Collins, M.B., Rossen, J., Pino-Navarro, J.D. (2008). Monte Verde: Seaweed, Food, Medicine, and the Peopling of South America. *Science*, 320(5877), 784-786. DOI: [10.1126/science.1156533](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1156533)