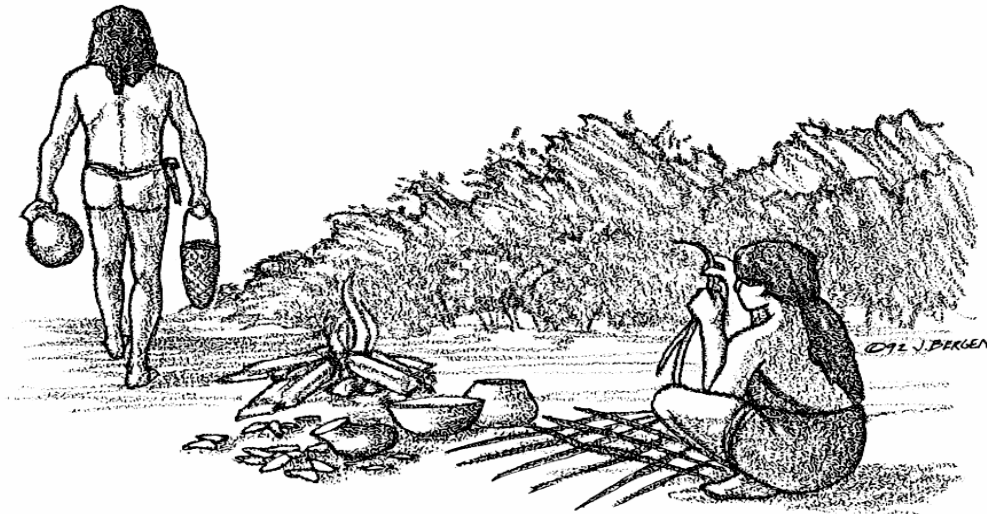


# Prehistoric Settlement on Coos Bay

by Kenn Oberrecht



*Radiocarbon dating, a process for determining the age of materials of organic origin, indicates that humans have inhabited or regularly visited coastal Oregon for at least the last 10,000 years.*

*It's likely that people were here long before that, but evidence of their residency may be locked up forever in the sediments of the ocean floor, relegated there by the same rising seas that helped create Oregon's estuaries at the end of the last ice age.*

Archeologists made one of the most interesting coastal discoveries in 1984 on the west side of Tahkenitch Lake, just north of Reedsport. Materials found at the site in a refuse heap, called a midden, dated back to about 6000 B.C. Surprisingly, bones and shells uncovered were from saltwater species only, indicating that Tahkenitch was not always a freshwater lake.

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Scientists now believe that Tahkenitch was once a deepwater estuary, where fresh water from feeder streams mingled with salt water from the ocean in a coastal embayment. Gradually, silt-laden freshwater runoff and sand-bearing tides raised the bottom and created flats, transforming Tahkenitch into a shallow-water estuary, perhaps much like Coos Bay.

About 3,000 years ago, the estuary was almost completely closed off from the sea by encroaching dunes. Eventually, the waters freshened, leaving a sprawling lake with only a small outlet to the sea.

The Tahkenitch estuary was a rich fishing and hunting area, its abundant fishes, shellfishes, and marine mammals attracting the early nomadic people who regularly visited and ultimately settled there to remain for as long as 3,000 years. We can assume that other estuaries along the Oregon coast, including the Coos estuary, were equally attractive to other tribes, loose gatherings, or families of these prehistoric humans.

*Ancient, prehistoric peoples, as well as the generations and different races that followed, including modern Indians and early pioneers, were enticed to settle along America's estuaries. They offered abundant food sources, transportation corridors, and natural protective boundaries.*

Whether they were descendants of the so-called Paleo-Indians, thought to have migrated from Asia to North America via the Bering Land Bridge, is a matter of conjecture. Nor do we know if the Paleo-Indians were the ancestors of modern coastal Indians. It could be that later Indians replaced or displaced the Paleo-Indians.

What we do know is that the south coast has been steadily inhabited for thousands of years. Archeologists have uncovered ancient sites at Mule Creek on the Rogue River; on Myers Creek, south of Gold Beach, near the Pistol River; near the mouth of the Umpqua River; and on the lower Coquille River at Bandon and Bullards Beach State Park.

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The Coos was among the richest of Oregon's estuaries. Its waters teemed with fish and fowl. Its tidal flats held seemingly unlimited bounty. Along its shorelines grew berries and edible plants. Elk and deer roamed the woodlands and meadows. Sources of fresh water were plentiful and always nearby. It was an inviting paradise with a temperate climate that promised an easy life.

In searching for clues to early human settlement along the shores of Coos Bay, "why" soon seems a foolish question. Better to wonder, "why not?"

