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A Brief History of the Coastal Route Hypotheses

In relation to the question of how the first people came to North America and who originated the coastal route idea, that actually goes back a long time. Before the discovery of the Folsom and Clovis sites in the southern US in the 1920's and 30's, it was commonly believed that people came around the coast from the Bering Strait by boat. But once they found those early interior big-game hunting cultures, then they had to try to explain how early terrestrial adaptations got into the southern parts of North America. And the famous ice free corridor proposal was generated back in the 1940's and 50's. And the coastal route fell into disfavour – extreme disfavour.

But in 1960 a man named Calvin Heusser, a palynologist, did his doctoral dissertation on early pollen sites along the Pacific Coast of North America, from Alaska down to Oregon, and he found some surprisingly early plant assemblages, at least for that time, implying that there had been plants growing along parts of the coast 11,000 or 12,000 years ago – much earlier than people believed at that time. The common idea at that time was that the coast was fully glaciated. But Heusser found these plant refugia, as he called them, and in a final chapter of his dissertation, noted that they could have been a useful stepping stone for people moving south from Beringia.

And as a graduate student I invested a week's meal money xeroxing a copy of Heusser's dissertation and I just built on his ideas. So I certainly did not invent the idea of the coastal route – it was Heusser's idea.