Reflections on North American Pacific Coast Prehistory

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The Pacific Coast of North America was occupied by many distinctive groups of coastal hunter-gatherers at the times of early contacts with Europeans. Despite significant cultural diversity, Pacific Coast peoples shared lifeways oriented toward generally similar marine, nearshore, littoral, and estuarine habitats. In this paper, we examine some major issues that guide much of the archaeology done along the Pacific Coast, then discuss some of the theoretical and methodological problems that limit the efficacy of archaeological reconstructions. Most archaeological research conducted on North America’s Pacific Coast has been oriented toward the search for the origins and development of a variety of cultural patterns. A comparative review of California and Northwest Coast sequences provides interesting parallels and discrepancies in the approaches taken in studying some of the major issues in Pacific Coast prehistory.

KEY WORDS: coastal prehistory; Pacific Coast; Northwest Coast; California; cultural complexity; ethnographic analogy.

INTRODUCTION

In satellite photos, the Pacific Coast of North America is a fine undulating line marking the contact between the vast Pacific Ocean and the western margins of California, Oregon, Washington, British Columbia, and Alaska (Fig. 1). From the Mexican border to the western tip of the Alaska Peninsula, this arcing line stretches for over 7500 km and spans almost 30° of latitude, from about 32°N to 62°N. Not surprisingly, it contains a diverse

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Fig. 1. The Pacific Coast of North America.