

Language, ecological diversity in Calif. linked

By Melissa Pandika, Los Angeles Times

Anthropologists have puzzled for decades over why a complex patchwork of languages emerged in California thousands of years ago, but not in other parts of North America. New research now traces California's linguistic diversity to its ecological diversity.

A study published Monday in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences found that the migrating tribes first settled along the state's lush Pacific coast, then moved into progressively drier habitats farther inland, resulting in an array of language groups living alongside one another. Prehistoric California was home to speakers of about 64 distinct languages, according to the California Department of Parks and Recreation.

Earlier studies have shown an association between ecological and linguistic diversity, but anthropologists Brian Coddington from the University of Utah and Terry Jones from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo wanted to understand how this diversity developed over time.

To that end, they tested a model of how people colonize landscapes, which behavioral ecologists first proposed around the 1970s. The model predicts that the greenest habitats will be settled first and have the densest populations, because of their ability to support more people. Later waves of migrants will settle in less suitable areas.

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