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Archaeology takes leap from gallery to cyberspace

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SFU's museum of archaeology and ethnology is taking the archaeology out of its gallery exhibits and onto the web. A new virtual exhibition, entitled A Journey To A New Land, presents current theories about the peopling of the New World and archaeological research in a readable, interactive format for a wide range of viewers, from primary age children to university students and armchair surfers.

The site, www.sfu.museum/journey, was created by the museum and SFU's learning and instructional development centre and features stunning graphics, interactive games and creative uses of the museum's photographic collections. "We wanted to take the museum out of its traditional setting and at the same time, showcase SFU research related to the prehistory of Western Canada," says Barbara Winter, museum curator, noting that the SFU museum was among the first in Canada to tap into cyberspace. The site features unique simulations of such activities as glacial recession and global glaciation, and video clips of more than a dozen researchers talking about their work. The site focuses on two main hypotheses of how people came to the New World. The traditionally accepted hypothesis is that they followed an inland ice-free corridor route from Siberia to the unglaciated regions south of the ice sheets. The other theory is that they took a coastal route, traveling by boat down the Pacific Coast.

"The coastal hypothesis, an idea brought forward many years ago by SFU archaeologist Knut Fladmark, is becoming more accepted as evidence mounts," notes Winter. "The site presents both views, and does so in the words of those doing the original science." Video clips feature everything from explanations of hypotheses and current research, including excavations in the Fraser Valley and other regions of B.C., to descriptions of research methods, such as radiocarbon dating, and basic science.

The site is linked through the Virtual Museum of Canada and will be unveiled in January. It is now being advertised to schools.

The exhibit was built by a team of more than 60 people, including archaeology students and graduates, LIDC's media production group, SFU scientists, students from primary age to university and officials from Parks Canada and the Geological Survey of Canada. Funded by Heritage Canada, the website is also available in French. "The idea behind the Virtual Museum is to take the enterprise of a museum and put it into a contemporary mode," adds Winter. "That's what museums today should be about."