Small islands given short shrift in assembling archaeological record

October 30 2008

Small islands dwarf large ones in archaeological importance, says a University of Florida researcher, who found that people who settled the Caribbean before Christopher Columbus preferred more minute pieces of land because they relied heavily on the sea.

"We've written history based on the bigger islands," said Bill Keegan, a University of Florida archaeologist whose study is published online in the journal *Human Ecology*. "Yet not only are we now seeing people earlier on smaller islands, but we're seeing them move into territories where we didn't expect them to at the time that they arrived."

Early Ceramic Age settlements have been found in the U.S. Virgin Islands and Montserrat, for example, but are absent from all of the larger islands in the Lesser Antilles, Keegan said. And all of the small islands along the windward east coast of St. Lucia have substantial ceramic artifacts — evidence of settlement — despite being less than one kilometer, or .62 mile, long, said Keegan, who is curator of Caribbean archaeology at the Florida Museum of Natural History on the UF campus.

It was thought that people preferred larger islands because the land mass of bigger islands could support a more diverse range of habitats and greater numbers of animal species for humans to subsist on, Keegan said. In addition, the focus of long-term evolutionary patterns has favored large islands, he said.

But small islands had coastlines rich with fish, and the absence of dense woodlands made them more suited to farming and hunting small prey such as iguanas, tortoises and hutias, a cat-sized rodent, he said.

"In the short term, small islands often are superior to larger islands, and for a variety of reasons, they were actually people's first choice," Keegan said. "They had better wind flow, fewer mosquitoes and more plentiful marine resources. With sufficient water and a relatively small amount of land to grow certain kinds of crops, they had everything one would need."

Because prehistoric people were drawn to these small islands, they may tell scientists more than settlements on larger islands about early patterns of life, Keegan said. To date, most archaeological excavations have taken place on bigger islands in such countries as Cuba, Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, he said.

Much of Keegan's research focused on Grand Turk, Middle Caicos and very small cays in the Turks and Caicos Islands, along with Carriacou in the Grenadine Islands, he said.

Pottery remains he found that were analyzed at the Florida Museum of Natural History's ceramic technology lab shows that humans often left large islands for small ones, probably initially to take advantage of abundant marine resources along the coastline, he said.

Ceramic pottery sherds recovered from the smaller Turks and Caicos islands, for example, were actually found to have come from Haiti, he said. "Traveling to the Turks and Caicos gave these people an opportunity to get sources of food that weren't locally available to them," he added.

In another case, pottery remains were found on an extremely tiny island

in the Turks and Caicos that had little soil and was accessible only by a sand spit, Keegan said.

"The island looks just like a rock," he said. "To think that anyone would have any reason to be out there is just beyond believability. But the island is named Pelican Cay, so people may have gone there to capture sea birds and their eggs."

People were drawn by the large varieties of fish, tortoises, iguanas and sea turtles that were in much greater supply on Grand Turk than the island of Hispaniola at the time, Keegan said. Remains from loggerhead turtles as big as 1,000 pounds were excavated from Grand Turk, although sea turtle sizes eventually declined to 60 pounds with overexploitation, he said.

"The high rates of return from capturing these animals far outweighed the costs of getting to Grand Turk," he said. "Such human migration patterns made good economic sense."

It was probably easier to sail to other islands than traverse from one end of an island to the other through the overgrown vegetation of tropical woodlands, he said.

"Most island archaeologists today, including those in the Caribbean, recognize that the sea was their ancient highway," he said.

And the smaller the island, the better. "Based on our work, it is clear that marine resources on smaller islands in the Caribbean were abundant, heavily exploited and even sought after by the native peoples," Keegan said. "You could say that 'small is beautiful' or 'size doesn't matter.'"

Source: University of Florida