

Ancient hunting site may rest under Lake Huron

July 2 2009, By Baldur Hedinsson

Deep beneath Lake Huron, signs of the Great Lakes' first human settlers are emerging.

Some 10,000 years or more ago, hunter-gatherers pursued migrating caribou in a corridor between Michigan and Ontario, a ridge that today is submerged in Lake Huron. The groups created lanes of football-sized rocks to guide herds toward an ambush, according to research by University of Michigan scientists.

A diving expedition to the site is planned for later this summer to further examine what the researchers believe is an aboriginal hunting construction and a primitive campsite or hunting pit. If confirmed, this finding would be the first evidence of ancient human activity located beneath the Great Lakes.

"The researchers have made a plausible case for the existence of manmade hunting structures on the ridge, and the site definitely deserves closer examination," said Michael Shott, professor of archaeology at the University of Akron in Ohio.

John O'Shea, a professor of anthropology with the University of Michigan Museum of Anthropology, and Guy Meadows, a professor of naval architecture and marine engineering with the university's Marine Hydrodynamics Laboratory, published their findings this month in the ["Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences."](#)

Using sonar and video observations, they identified a 1,148-foot-long snake-like stone feature closely resembling a caribou-driving lane on a 10-mile-wide ridge more than 100 feet below Lake Huron's surface. Indigenous North Americans constructed such lanes, lining up rocks to herd migrating animals such as caribou toward an ambush.

"The lane is not as much a physical barrier as a psychological barrier," said John Halsey, state archaeologist with the Michigan Historical Center. "The animals being hunted were physically able to jump over the obstruction, but they didn't, and the early hunters had figured that out."

Comparatively few sites are known in the Great Lakes region from the period when hunter-gatherer societies established more permanent settlements.

"Ten thousand years ago, the Midwest was a completely different place," Meadows said.

At that time, water levels of the Great Lakes were much lower because a mile-thick glacier covered most of Canada. When the glacier retreated, meltwater filled the lakes, immersing human outposts and hunting structures close to the coastline, Meadows explained.

Scientists have long suspected the Great Lakes contain many archaeological sites, but finding them is a tricky task. Lake bottoms are covered with algae and mussels, and many sites have eroded away or are concealed in sediment from long exposure to storm waves.

The Alpena-Amberley ridge, which is more than 100 miles long, is the perfect candidate for undamaged archaeological sites. It is at a depth shallow enough to have been above water for more than 2,000 years, yet deep enough to be shielded from weathering waves.

Meadows anticipates the potential for similar archaeological sites at a similar depth at the mouth of Traverse Bay and Green Bay.

If the long row of stones turns out to be manmade, their unusual and challenging location has some benefits. It appears the ridge is relatively unspoiled -- farming and urban development haven't altered it.

And unlike caribou-driving lanes found on land, which are difficult to date because of the lack of artifacts nearby, this one had to have been constructed sometime between 7,500 and 10,000 years ago, when the ridge was above water.

"While the idea is very intriguing, and the reasoning is quite credible, it remains unproven that these structures are manmade, and the researchers have to convince the archaeological community," said Jack Brink, curator of archaeology with the Royal Alberta Museum in Edmonton, Alberta. "Sending an archaeologist down there and making sure the driving lanes were constructed by humans would convince me."

Later this summer, scuba divers will be able to reach many of the features the researchers have identified. The scientists also plan to continue their sonar and video observations along other parts of the ridge.

"Though artifacts are rarely found close to caribou-hunting structures on land, we are excited about the possibility of discovering remains from ancient civilizations beneath the [Great Lakes](#)," Meadows said.

"In our case, I guess the ideal smoking gun would be a caribou skull with a spear sticking out of it," he added, laughing.

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