Lost Country Puts Climate Change on the Map

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Scientists at the University of Birmingham have unearthed a stark warning from the bottom of the sea on the speed of climate change and how we could suffer the effects over the next century.

Researchers have used new, advanced technology to map and explore a lost prehistoric world deep beneath the North Sea – the results of which could fundamentally change our attitudes towards global warming.

In the largest survey of this kind ever, researchers have analysed seismic data, originally collected for oil exploration to map a 23,000-km2 expanse under the North Sea. The stretch of water was created between 18,000 and 7,000 BC, when the effects of global warming induced sea levels to rise, swallowing the vast, inhabited plain that had stretched to the Norwegian coast.

It is the scale and speed of the flooding that is most shocking, particularly today with the stark threat of the impact of global warming, because what happened to this immense expanse also resulted in a real human tragedy.

Professor Vince Gaffney, Chair in Landscape Archaeology and Geomatics at the University of Birmingham, who worked on the project summarises: “In 10,000 BC hunter-gatherers were living on the land in the middle of the North Sea, by 6,000 BC Britain was an island. The area we have mapped was wiped out in the space of 4000 years.”

Whilst the catastrophic invasion of waters was devastating, its rapidity did cause the preservation of one of the most extensive prehistoric landscapes in Europe – and perhaps the world. This has enabled researchers at Birmingham to map and explore an area the size of Wales as it appeared around 10, 000 BC.

The scientists have mapped coastlines, rivers, marshlands and hills throughout the project – areas that would have been home to the hunter-gathers of Europe. Whilst the impact of global warming would have been slow overall, its effects could at times have been terrifyingly fast, with whole territories disappearing within the memory of generations.

Most shocking of all however, these changes occurred as a consequence of climatic change equivalent to the rate predicted over the next century.

Professor Gaffney says the results should provide a stark warning: “At a time when global warming and sea level rise are now accepted as amongst the greatest threat to our lifestyles, the fate of the landscapes and peoples of the North Sea may yet be interpreted not as an academic curiosity but as a significant warning.”

The project is featured on Britain’s Drowned World: Time Team Special, to be broadcast on Channel 4 on Tuesday 24 April at 9pm.

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NOTES TO EDITORS:

Prof Vince Gaffney is available for interview on Monday 23 April. Contact Press Office below for interview time.

The North Sea Visualisation Team from the University of Birmingham comprises:

Prof Vincent Gaffney – Chair in Landscape Archaeology and Geomatics, Institute of Archaeology and Antiquity

Simon Fitch – Research Fellow, Institute of Archaeology and Antiquity

Dr Ken Thomson – Lecturer in Basin Dynamics, School of Geography, Earth & Environmental Sciences.

It is with great sorrow that the University learnt that Dr Thomson died tragically last week. Prof Gaffney said: “Dr Thomson was a highly regarded colleague, his contribution to this project was invaluable and he will be sorely missed.”

The seismic data has been supplied courtesy of the PGS Southern North Sea Mega Survey, and was originally carried out for oil prospection. More information on PGS is available online:

www.pgs.com/ (http://www.pgs.com/)

Funding for the Project was provided by the English Heritage through the Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund.

FURTHER MEDIA INFORMATION:

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