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SCIENTISTS FIND MASSIVE MAYAN SOCIETY UNDER GUATEMALA JUNGLE

GUATEMALA CITY—Researchers using a high-tech aerial mapping technique have found tens of thousands of previously undetected Mayan houses, buildings, defense works and pyramids in the dense jungle of Guatemala's Peten region, suggesting that millions more people lived there than previously thought.

The discoveries, which included industrial-sized agricultural fields and irrigation canals, were announced Thursday by an alliance of US, European and Guatemalan archaeologists working with Guatemala's Mayan Heritage and Nature Foundation.



This digital 3D image provided by Guatemala's Mayan Heritage and Nature Foundation, Pacunam, shows a depiction of the Mayan archaeological site at Tikal in Guatemala. —AP

Sustainable agriculture

The study estimates that roughly 10 million people may have lived within the Maya Lowlands, meaning that kind of massive food production might have been needed.

"That is two to three times more (inhabitants) than people were saying there were," said Marcello Canuto, a professor of anthropology at Tulane University.

Researchers used a mapping technique called Lidar, which stands for Light Detection And Ranging.

It bounces pulsed laser light off the ground, revealing contours hidden by dense foliage.

Highly organized workforce

The images revealed that the Mayans altered the landscape in a much broader way than previously thought; in some areas, 95 percent of available land was cultivated.

"Their agriculture is much more intensive and therefore sustainable than we thought, and they were cultivating every inch of the land," said Francisco Estrada-Belli, a research assistant professor at Tulane University, noting the ancient Mayas partly drained swampy areas that haven't been considered worth farming since.

And the extensive defensive fences, ditch-and-rampart systems and irrigation canals suggest a highly organized workforce.

"There's state involvement here, because we see large canals being dug that are redirecting natural water flows," said Thomas Garrison, assistant professor of anthropology at Ithaca College in New York. —AP

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