

THE Current

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UCSB Researcher Receives \$100,000 NOAA Grant for Archaeological Research

Thanks to a \$100,000 grant from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), UC Santa Barbara graduate student Amy Gusick is searching underwater landscapes in Mexico this week, hoping to find evidence of ancient habitations.

Working with colleague Loren Davis, associate professor of anthropology at Oregon State University, Gusick on Friday will begin the second phase of a research project that started in 2006. Their research will take place off the coast of Isla Espiritu Santo in the Sea of Cortez. Gusick, a Ph.D. student in anthropology at UCSB, and Davis are hoping to find underwater sites that provide proof of human coastal migrations to the New World some 15,000 years ago.

"There are two sites on that island that date to this period (10,000-15,000 years ago)," Gusick said, "but because sea level is up about 95 meters from where it was then, other sites that date to this time period may have been inundated. We think there may be rock shelters in the water there. It would be great to find these inundated rock shelters, and, hopefully, preserved evidence of the first Americans."

A 2006 bathymetric survey of this area off of La Paz convinced Gusick and Davis that this was a prime area for further study. In 2008, they conducted scuba surveys in

about 60 feet of water that produced mounds of shells which they believe were collected by early settlers. However, since they were working in a national park area, there were limits to their exploration. "We had to dig with our hands because we could not get permits to use any tools at that point in the project," Gusick said.

The NOAA grant, combined with funding from the National Geographic Society/Waitt Family Foundation, has made it possible to expand their research. The dives that begin Friday will be more extensive -- and more important.

"This one is bigger," Gusick said. "We'll be working at depths up to 200 feet and hope to find preserved cultural material in this inundated area. We have identified 15 specific areas and we'll be making dives focusing on these targets. We are looking for evidence of tool manufacturing and resource extraction."

The researchers will be taking core samples and will use an airlift dredge made specifically for this project to vacuum sediment from the sea floor.

"Underwater archaeology has always focused on things like shipwrecks," Gusick said. "Prehistoric underwater archaeology is a new discipline. We're trying to understand the migration patterns of people who settled here. We're building a case for the importance of this research."

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.