MEDIA RELEASE
4 March 2026

Ancient settlement discovered in a swamp: a new example of the long-term survival of the Maya

Researchers have discovered the remains of an ancient Maya wetlands settlement used for fishing and gathering protein that dates back 2000 years.

An international team of archaeologists and geographers located the well-preserved ancient Maya settlement in the Birds of Paradise wetlands of northern Belize, including the largest collection of pre-Columbian wood structures uncovered inland.

Archaeologists have been examining this region for evidence of Maya settlement and land-use after the so-called "collapse" of the civilisation in the Late to Terminal Classic period, beginning around 1400 years ago.

The wetland Maya settlement included important architecture and artifacts from the Maya Terminal Classic Period (800–1000 CE) through to the Postclassic Period (1000–1500 CE) — a time when many Maya urban centres had already been abandoned after significant societal, political, and environmental pressures, including climate change.

Recent studies have found the Maya converted forested wetlands in Belize and elsewhere into productive agricultural systems and settlements which helped them adapt through severe climatic variations, including drought.

The findings have been published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences journal this week.

"As nearby urban places of power depopulated, the Maya remained at the Birds of Paradise wetlands for subsistence, choosing to reinvest labour in maintaining and reworking these ancestral landscapes while coping with changing social, political, and environmental challenges," the research paper said.

"As in other persistent places, this was clearly a long-term gathering place with hard infrastructure, with evidence of people processing and consuming food, goods, and community."

Australian Catholic University geographer Dr Duncan Cook, one of the co-authors of the PNAS research paper, said the discovery of this settlement advanced our understanding of how and when the Maya adapted and survived in difficult climates.

“The discovery of extensive wood remains is incredibly rare in tropical environments because it usually isn’t preserved – these artefacts aren’t normally available for researchers to study,” Dr Cook said.

“This study is a clear snapshot of everyday ancient Maya life, but in a very unique environmental setting, at a time when many Maya urban areas elsewhere had already declined.

“This is a site of long-term adaptation and survival.”

Lead author and Assistant Professor of Anthropology at New York University, Lara Sánchez-Morales, said the discovery of well-preserved wooden architecture could change how archaeologists searched for other settlements and artifacts in the Americas.

“It challenges the long-held assumption that sites like this could not survive in the American tropics, and it suggests we might be overlooking similar places,” Dr Sánchez-Morales said.

“It’s a reminder that the archaeological record of these environments is richer than we once thought, and it pushes us to rethink how we search for and interpret settlements in the American tropics.”

During the excavation, the team found a settlement consisting of eight earthen mounds, which were likely structure pads for buildings, and a large, raised platform constructed of limestone.

A wide variety of scattered ceramic and lithic artifacts and faunal remains were excavated at the site along with ten well-preserved wooden posts, likely representing the site’s structural foundations.

“Together, these reveal a highly adaptable community with diverse tools, foods, and building materials,” Professor of Geography and co-author Timothy Beach said

“This shows us that Maya communities could shift habitats and persist through climate extremes, but we still don’t know how large this wetland population was or how it functioned.

“Our next steps include expanding excavations to understand how the Maya built with rare woods, how they fed themselves, and how this wetland settlement fit into a region undergoing widespread abandonment.”

Dr Duncan Cook is available for interview on 0468 690 744 or Duncan.Cook@acu.edu.au. He is the Associate Professor of Geography based at ACU Brisbane.

Media Contact: Emilie Ng, 0475 963 606, emilie.ng@acu.edu.au