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'Chimneys' found on floor of Pacific by Hawaiiin group

HONOLULU (AP) — Chimney stacks of crystallized minerals and a new type of marine animal have been discovered on the western Pacific floor by University of Hawaii researchers.

The sulfide "chimneys" and shells of a peculiar new deep-sea snail were photographed with an ocean-bottom camera system aboard the UH vessel Moana Wave.

The scientists also found a new type of plate boundary — where the edges of the Earth's plates meet and new crust is forming from basaltic lavas.

Brian Taylor, associate professor of geology and geophysics at the university's Hawaii Institute of Geophysics (HIG), led the six-week-long investigation. It began in Honiara in the Solomon Islands and ended in Ponape in the Caroline Islands.

"It was probably one of the most successful cruises the HIG has ever had," Taylor said in an interview. Good weather helped, he said. "We did 125 percent of what we set out to do and everything worked."

The scientists used HIG's unique SeaMARC II mapping instrument to study the submarine geology of the Manus basin in the Bismarck Sea north of New Britain, off the northeast coast of Papua New Guinea.

They also looked at the sea floor by "literally flying a camera system three to five yards off the bottom," Taylor said.

Besides the HIG team, scientists aboard the ship were from Australia, New Guinea and the Committee for Coordination of Joint Prospecting for Mineral Resources in South Pacific Offshore Areas, based in Suva, Fiji.

They are "ecstatic" about the findings, Taylor said. Chimneys with metals have been found near the Galapagos Islands and in other eastern Pacific areas, but those found by the Moana Wave are the first located in the western Pacific, he said.

The stacks are about 1 1/2 miles below the surface. This is "very shallow for this type of occurrence," which will be good for mining when the resources are needed, Taylor said.

He said some of the chimneys are 6 to 10 feet high and others are 20 to 30 feet. They occur where the Earth's crust is being split apart and new lavas are being formed, Taylor explained. As water erupts from the hot volcanic material and hits cold seawater, metals are thrown out and form sulfide minerals such as copper, lead and zinc.

"It is just like a chimney on a house," he said. "In that case, hot air is rising and as it hits the outside air, there is a column of smoke. Similarly, as the hot water comes out of the crust, it forms a plume of dense black fluid as the hot water hits the cold water.

Because of this, the formations have been dubbed "black smokers." He said the sulfurous fluids attract "an abnormal abundance" of deep-sea life, such as crabs, rat-tail fish, horny coral, tube worms and other fauna similar to that found around hot water vents in the eastern Pacific.

Slouch By Jim Earle



But Manus basin has a species of deep-sea snail — a member of the trochodonta family — that has never been seen before, he said.

He said shells "about the size of a fist" littered the sea floor around chimney stack in one area. None were around chimneys photographed feet away, so the discovery was "fairly miraculous," Taylor said.

He said the animals had died because the hot water went away. The community of life was dependent on the hot water — that is why they died at these sites.

The scientists spent a major part of the cruise surveying Manus basin with SeaMARC II to study faults, or fractures, in the sea floor and spreading centers where the Earth is creating new crust.

SeaMARC is a high-resolution sonar and mapping system that produces charts of the sea floor similar to air photo mosaics and topographic maps.

She said she had spent the last few days of her vacation at the zoo's check-out counter, sampling and X-ray heart.

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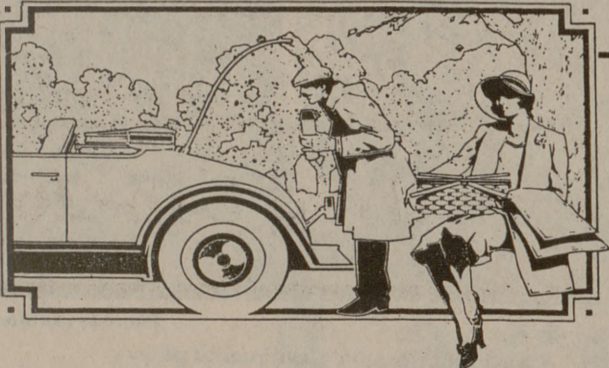
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