LSU mounds yield anomaly

BY JORDAN BLUM
Capitol news bureau

While studying the ancient LSU Mounds with his geoarchaeology class last semester, LSU professor Brooks Ellwood discovered an “anomaly” deep inside.

That discovery led to a team of the state’s top archaeologists on Wednesday taking coresamples more than 5 meters — about 17 feet — deep into the 5,000-year-old mounds built by early American Indians. It was the first deep sampling since the mounds were first dated in 1982.

“This was a big surprise, this huge anomaly,” Ellwood said Wednesday after preliminarily analyzing a “charcoal horizon” detected in the core samples that might have caused the anomaly.

“It’s a localized burn, so it could be a pit barbecue,” Ellwood said, “or it could be — although it’s never been seen — they cremated someone there.”

The hope is to learn more about the exact age of the mounds, how they were built and, how long it took and why, he said. Pollen also will be studied to learn cues about the climate back then, he said.

The mounds, commonly called the Indian Mounds, are believed to have been used for ceremonial and marking point purposes, said Rebecca Saunders, archaeology professor and associate curator of the LSU Museum of Natural Science.

“I don’t think people really understand these are our pyramids,” Saunders said. “The only thing is they don’t have stones.”

Less than three decades ago, no one believed mounds were built 5,000 years ago in North America, she said. The belief was that everyone was more nomadic hunters and gatherers and that agriculture and tribal chiefs were needed before structures would be built.

Louisiana is home to hundreds of prehistoric American Indian mounds that are among the oldest in the continent. The two LSU Mounds are listed in the National Register of Historic Places. In trail guides, Lt. Gov. Mitch Landrieu touts many of the mounds as far older than the Egyptian pyramids or Stonehenge.

Heather McKillop, geography professor and Louisiana Archaeological Survey and Antiquities Commission chairwoman, said the mounds are often taken for granted.

“These mounds are here, and we walk past them all the time,” McKillop said. “But they’re incredibly important historically to the state. Getting everybody together here is a real exciting opportunity.”

T.R. Kidder, mounds researcher and anthropology professor at Washington University in St. Louis, has described Louisiana as “New York, London and Tokyo all rolled into one” for

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LSU professors Brooks Ellwood, left, and Rebecca Saunders shake out a core sample taken from deep within the LSU Mounds on Wednesday. Jennifer Gardiner, right, a graduate student in LSU’s Geology and Anthropology Department, keeps the soil lined up.
North America prior to 1,000 B.C.

The Lower Mississippi delta region was much of the continent's foundation for early human life, Saunders said.

Still, Ellwood said, so little is known about these mounds that anything learned is great news.

The northern LSU mound is made partly of more porous dirt and more saturated with water, he said. The southern mound has harder clay dirt.

Despite the differing materials, Ellwood said, data suggest they were built simultaneously and they have similar markers from when extended breaks were taken during construction.

The ancient people would build portions, travel for months and then return.

“We know very little about them and the people who made them,” Ellwood said. “We don’t know what all they were used for. And why did they build paired mounds?”

Thurman Allen controls the coring machine on Wednesday as Joel Saunders, right foreground, waits with an extension. Archaeologists are taking samples from about 17 feet down in the LSU Mounds.