

Yamagata University team discovers 24 ancient geoglyphs on Peru's Nazca Plateau

A photo taken in January shows an ancient geoglyph in the shape of a llama found by Yamagata University researchers on the Nazca Plateau in Peru. | YAMAGATA UNIVERSITY / KYODO

A research team from Yamagata University has found 24 geoglyphs on Peru's Nazca Plateau in the arid region near Nazca of southern Peru, that are believed to be older than the famous hummingbird and monkey geoglyphs at the UNESCO World Heritage site, announced July 7.

The geoglyphs, discovered about 1½ km north of the town of Nazca in southern Peru, include what looks like a llama and other unrecognizable land pictures, which are believed to date back to 400 to 200 B.C., the team said Tuesday.

The largest is about 20 meters in length, they said.

The geoglyphs, found in surveys between last December and February, have been reported to the Peruvian government.

"Nazca geoglyphs are being affected by the expansion of urban areas. We want to preserve them by sharing their importance with local people," said Masato Sakai, a professor at the university's Nazca research center, which opened in Peru in 2012.

The research team started its fieldwork on the Nazca lines in 2004. To date, they have discovered around 50 geoglyphs in the area.

The discovery was made by a team of about 10 researchers,

including Masato Sakai, a professor of cultural anthropology at the university who is also the deputy director of the university's Nazca research institute. The team began investigating the northern slopes of the urban areas of Nazca, Peru, from autumn 2013 and discovered 17 geoglyphs depicting llamas before the end of fiscal 2013.

The newest announcement is based on the team's findings in fiscal 2014. They discovered five new examples near the area where they found geoglyphs the previous fiscal year and 19 more on the slopes of a nearby mountain.

Masato Sakai, a professor of cultural anthropology at Yamagata University and the deputy director of the university's Nazca research institute, talks about the newest geoglyphs found in areas near Nazca, Peru, in Yamagata on July 7. (Nobuyoshi Yonezawa)

Discovered in the 1920s, the geoglyphs and line drawings of Nazca and Pampas de Jumana are designated a UNESCO World Heritage site. They are etched into the dusty soil and cover some 450 square kilometers.

The 24 newly discovered geoglyphs are believed to date to around 400 B.C.-200 B.C., making them older than the iconic Nazca Line drawing known as the hummingbird. They range from 5 to 20 meters in length.

Most of the lines are heavily eroded, making them difficult to make out with the naked eye, but the researchers used equipment including a 3-D scanner to sketch out the pattern. Most of the drawings seem to depict llamas, the team said.

"We have found 41 geoglyphs in fiscal 2013 and 2014 combined," Sakai said. "There are no other areas concentrated with this many examples. Yet with both urban areas and farmland encroaching on the drawings, they are under the threat of being destroyed without being recognized as geoglyphs."

The university plans to provide information to the Peruvian government's Culture Ministry, which it is partnered with, along with the city government of Nazca in the hopes of preserving the geoglyphs.