

# Scientists discover why Easter Island statues were built in certain spots

By Nicola Davis, The Guardian, adapted by Newsela staff on 01.25.19

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Easter Island, or Rapa Nui, has more than 300 megalithic platforms, each of which might have been made by a separate community. Photo by: Andia/ UIG via Getty Images

The huge stone figures of Easter Island have intrigued explorers, scientists and the wider world for hundreds of years. Now experts say they may have cracked one of the island's biggest mysteries: why the statues are where they are.

Scientists say they have studied the locations of the platforms, or ahu, on which many of the statues sit. They have also studied the statues, known as moai. They found that the statues could always be found where there is fresh water. Communities would have needed that water for drinking and cooking.

Scientists believe the statues represent ancestors and were linked to ritual, or religious activities. However, there was more to them. At least part of their construction, such as their size, could be tied to the presence of natural resources in the area, said Carl Lipo, who teaches at Binghamton University in New York. He helped write the study.

Easter Island, or Rapa Nui, is a faraway island in the South Pacific Ocean. There are more than 300 platforms on the island. Each one might have been made by a separate community. The first of these platforms was probably built in the 1200s. Many are found around the coast. Until now, the reason for the statues' locations has been a mystery.

### **Statues And Water Go Hand In Hand**

The team focused on the east side of the island. Resources, such as bodies of water, have been well-mapped there. Team members looked at the spread of the 93 platforms constructed on the east side before European sailors turned up in the 1700s.

The statues are made of rock and so were the tools that shaped them. The team looked to see if sources of rock were close by the statues, but they were not. The team then looked at whether the ahu were found near other important resources. These included things like gardens spread with stones, sites linked to fishing or sources of fresh water. Freshwater quickly drew the team's interest. This is water that isn't salty. Animals can use it as drinking water. The island has no permanent freshwater streams. There is also little proof its lakes were used by islanders when the statues were built.

The new study shows that the closeness to freshwater seems to explain the ahu locations. It also explains why the statues crop up inland as well as on the coast. Lipo also said historic wells help explain some otherwise puzzling ahu locations. "Every time we saw massive amounts of fresh water, we saw giant statues," he said. "It was ridiculously predictable."

The results, said Lipo, made sense, as drinking water is key for communities. Also, it is impractical to have to walk miles for a quick swig. "You would do stuff near the fresh water," he said.

### **Building Brought Communities Together**

The study adds weight to another idea: that communities both clashed and worked together through statue building. This contrasts with a previous idea that islanders fought over water and other natural resources. Lipo says there is little proof for that idea. Indeed, the team is now exploring whether the statues' size or other aspects might be linked to water quality. Communities may have used the statues to show off this competitive advantage to other islanders.

Community and helping each other, stresses Lipo, were important in building the statues. "Anything that brings you together is going to make you stronger and allow you to survive," he said. "I think that is the secret to Easter Island."

But not everyone agrees with Lipo. Jo Anne Val Tilburg is an Easter Island expert at the University of California at Los Angeles. She said people have long known about freshwater near coastal statues. These sources of water were probably not that important to islanders. She said she thought it was highly unlikely that these resources were important to finding the platforms.

## Quiz

- 1 Read the introduction [paragraphs 1-4]. Which selection from the section shows one purpose of the Easter Island statues?
- (A) Now experts say they may have cracked one of the island's biggest mysteries: why the statues are where they are.
  - (B) Scientists say they have studied the locations of the platforms, or ahu, on which many of the statues sit.
  - (C) Scientists believe the statues represent ancestors and were linked to ritual, or religious activities.
  - (D) There are more than 300 platforms on the island. Each one might have been made by a separate community.
- 2 Read the section "Statues And Water Go Hand In Hand." Which selection from the section shows why Lipo's team chose to focus their study on the eastern side of the island?
- (A) The team focused on the east side of the island.
  - (B) Resources, such as bodies of water, have been well-mapped there.
  - (C) Team members looked at the spread of the 93 platforms constructed on the east side.
  - (D) European sailors turned up around 500 years after the platforms were built in the 1700s.
- 3 According to Lipo's team, what is the relationship between the statues and water?
- (A) Statues were built near freshwater because water is essential for communities and the statues were an important part of local communities.
  - (B) Statues were built near saltwater because water is essential for rituals and the statues helped mark water's location for important rituals.
  - (C) Statues were built near freshwater because religious rituals of any community always require freshwater and large statues of ancestors.
  - (D) Statues were built near saltwater because fishing is essential for communities, and the statues were thought to help bring food to the community.
- 4 Why did Jo Anne Val Tilburg feel skeptical after hearing about Lipo's theory?
- (A) She thinks there is not enough evidence that the statues his team found were all located near freshwater sources.
  - (B) She thinks there is evidence that other resources besides water were located near the statues, and these resources were more important.
  - (C) She thinks the freshwater connection is not new, and the water his team found was not important to the island communities.
  - (D) She thinks there is evidence that the platforms were placed randomly, not due to a specific natural resource or purpose.