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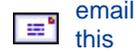
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Posted on Tue, Dec. 14, 2004

Scientist envisions 60-foot wave hitting California

By Betsy Mason
CONTRA COSTA TIMES

SAN FRANCISCO - Giant tsunamis hundreds of feet high have walloped islands and coastal areas repeatedly in the past, and geologists have reason to believe the stage is set for another monster wave.

The waves may have been caused by landslides on the flanks of volcanic islands such as the Hawaiian islands, said geologist Gary McMurtry of the University of Hawaii.

He believes the conditions may be right for another big landslide, and, if it happens on Hawaii, the resulting wave could wipe out most of the population of Hawaii and reach all the way to the California coast.

"I think this is a serious concern," McMurtry said Monday at the American Geophysical Union meeting in San Francisco. "It would be a pretty good sized tsunami, even in California."

He estimates the wave could still be 60 feet high when it hits California.

A team of researchers led by McMurtry found deposits of jumbled rocks, shells and sand that are typical ocean deposits more than 1,600 feet above sea level on the island of Hawaii. The deposits are around 120,000 years old, the same age as a giant landslide on the slope of Mauna Loa volcano.

The landslide generated an enormous wave hundreds of feet high that brought the ocean sediments with it, said McMurtry. And there is similar evidence that tsunamis have struck in other parts of the world. Ocean deposits in caves 60 feet above sea level on Bermuda may have been caused by a tsunami from a landslide about 450,000 years ago on the Canary Islands off Spain, he said.

A giant wave caused by a landslide hasn't struck land during historic times, said geologist Peter Cervelli of the U. S. Geological Survey's Alaska Volcano Observatory in Fairbanks. But he said there is reason to believe the slides can create waves like this because large chunks of glaciers have been seen making strong waves in fjords in Alaska.

Though the giant tsunamis occur about as often as an asteroid hits the earth, the waves don't occur randomly like asteroid strikes.

"We see a correlation between the tsunamis and warmer climate," McMurtry said.

By matching up evidence of giant tidal waves with geologic evidence of past sea level, he found that the landslides tend to occur during warmer periods with higher global sea level, such as the one the earth is in right now.

Though nobody is sure what triggers these mammoth slides, McMurtry suspects the increase in rainfall and higher sea level that comes with warmer climates could infiltrate faults on the slopes of volcanoes and push the sides apart, effectively lubricating the fault surfaces, making them prone to slip.

And any of the volcanic islands could host one of these big slides. Tahiti, and even tiny Pitcairn Island, could generate a wave big enough to reach California, McMurtry said.

This week's American Geophysical Union meeting has drawn 10,000 international geophysicists to San Francisco.

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