



The Underwater Forest

Featured in *This is Alabama*, written by Ben Raines, www.thisisalabama.org/underwaterforest/

Sandy Welches, MGV 2005

Just off the coast of Alabama, an ancient forest swarms with sea life just like a coral reef. How did it get there?



Wood from this ancient forest is still so fresh that it drips with sap. (Photo: This Is Alabama/YouTube https://media.mnn.com/assets/images/2017/07/uwforest.png.653x0_q80_crop-smart.png)

The Underwater Forest details the discovery and exploration of an ancient cypress forest of gigantic trees found sixty feet underwater in the Gulf of Mexico, due south of Gulf Shores, Alabama. The forest stretches the equivalent of multiple city blocks deep beneath the surface of modern-day Mobile Bay. The forest dates to an ice age more than 60,000 years ago, when sea levels were about 400 feet lower than they are today. The forest appears to be a wholly unique relic of our planet's past, the only known site where a coastal ice age forest this old has been preserved in place. It is considered a treasure trove of information, providing new insights into everything from climate in the region to annual rainfall, insect populations, and the types of plants that inhabited the Gulf Coast before humans arrived in the new world. Scientific analysis of the site is ongoing. The scientists have even discovered the path of a large river winding its way through the giant cypress.

"These trees were basically entombed or hermetically sealed," explained Raines. "They have nine feet of sediment over them, and oxygen is locked out. It's similar to peat bogs in Ireland, where scientists have found human bodies that were preserved by the unique environmental conditions."

Cores from this layer of peat reveal some ominous lessons about climate change. The forest was buried rapidly, eventually inundated by sea levels that rose by as much as 8 feet every 100 years. It's a preview of what could happen in the near future if global warming remains unchecked. Coastlines can disappear rapidly.

The scientists believe that the forest was buried beneath the Gulf sediments for eons, until giant waves driven by Hurricane Ivan in 2004 uncovered it. Raines and AL.com collected the first samples from the site, and participated in every scientific mission to the site, beginning in 2012. Dropping 10 fathoms below the green waves of



the Gulf and back in time to this prehistoric world amounts to a sort of time traveler's journey. Nothing like the forest, in terms of age or scale, has ever been found. The oxygen-free underwater environment has hermetically sealed the trees in a sort of natural time capsule.

A documentary film has been written and directed by Ben Raines, who filmed the underwater sequences and organized the first scientific missions to the site. The film follows the work of the team investigating the site, both underwater and in the laboratory.

Join the first scientists and film crew to visit the site as they unlock the secrets of the past beneath the Gulf of Mexico. The Underwater Forest will air on Alabama Public Television on July 23rd at 6 pm and July 24th at 9 pm.

