

The Aitape PNG Earthquake/Tsunami - 1998

Just before 7 pm on Friday 17 July 1998, a magnitude 7.0 earthquake rocked the north coast region of Papua New Guinea (PNG). The Aitape tsunami took over 2000 lives, caused extensive damage to houses and public infrastructure, and altered the environment around the village.

A proposal to monitor aftershocks and provide advice to the PNG and Australian governments was prepared by Papua New Guinea Geological Survey (PNGGS) and Australian Geological Survey Organisation (now Geoscience Australia) scientists and submitted by AusAID. Three weeks later, the first of four portable digital recorders with triaxial seismometers were installed in Wewak, Romei and Leitre Catholic Missions and Sibilanga Christian Bretheren Mission. Dial up vertical component short period seismographs were installed at Wewak and Aitape.

The network was installed for five weeks and the data were analysed to make a better estimate of the location of the main shock and help identify the cause of the earthquake. This is important for tsunami modellers trying to explain why such a large tsunami, measured by the Japanese, US, Australian and New Zealand tsunami investigating team, crossed the Sissano Lagoon sandbar at an average height of 10.5 metres.



Evidence of the height of the wave, roof sheeting wrapped around a coconut palm.



Sissano lagoon looking north west.



Sissano lagoon looking south east.



Destruction of coconut palms and village.



Scouring of the shore line.



Building foundation remnants.



Building stumps and fallen palm trees.