

## Many gather to ponder end of Maya days

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Hundreds of people gathered near the Golden Gate Bridge over the weekend to ponder the enigmatic date of Dec. 21, 2012, the last day of the ancient Maya calendar and the focus of many end-of-the-world predictions.

In these times of economic distress, participants shelled out \$300 each to attend the sold-out 2012 Conference, where astrologers, UFO fans, shamans and New Age entrepreneurs of every stripe presented their dreams and dreads in two days of lectures, group meditations, documentaries and, of course, self-promotion.

Normally, New Age platforms attract the interest of only the narrowest group of enthusiasts. But this one has been generating wider audiences because it so forcefully underscores the turmoil of the times, as indicated by the stock market plunge, Iran's nuclear ambitions, the Sept. 11 attacks, global warming and the possibility of a magnetic pole shift and stronger sunspot cycles.

To some, the end of the Maya Long Calendar's roughly 5,000-year cycle portends calamity, or the birth of a new age, or both.

The conference's slogan: "Shift happens."

The gathering of about 300 people from as far away as Holland was launched with the blessings of a Guatemalan shaman and the scary predictions of Jay Weidner, whose firm, Sacred Mysteries, has sponsored four 2012 events in the last six months.

"The greatest crisis in human history is unfolding all around us. It's not the end of this world, but it's the end of this age," he likes to say. "To survive the 21st century, we're going to have to become a sustainable world -- people should want to know how to pound a nail, milk a cow and grow their own food."

Now, a gold rush of "2012ology" is underway. A similar conference in Hollywood this year drew an audience of more than 1,000. At least two gatherings are planned for the Los Angeles area in the spring. "A Complete Idiot's Guide to 2012" was published last month, adding to a burgeoning market of books, CDs and History Channel specials suggesting that the ancient Maya predicted the impending end of the world as we know it.

Director Michael Bay is set to make a movie titled "2012," based on a novel about multiple earths in parallel universes slated for destruction.

Stewart Guthrie, professor emeritus of anthropology at Fordham University, was not surprised by the growing interest in newfangled notions about what those Maya time keepers might have had in mind as far back as AD 200.

"When events leave us feeling powerless and confused, we are more open to new claims about the disorders of the world," he said. "If people persuade enough others to accept their answers to this crazy world, it can become a movement, for better or worse."

For example, the Gulf War and the Oklahoma City bombing boosted the popularity of doomsday predictions of famine, earthquakes and social tumult. Some were cobbled from the spooky riddles and images in the Bible's book of Revelation, which scholars believe was actually written to help early Christians cope with their Roman oppressors.

In 1973, when the appearance of Comet Kohoutek coincided with a decision by members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries to announce an oil embargo, the big question was whether the chunk of dirty ice hurtling through space would be the most spectacular celestial sight of the century, or wreak social unrest, tidal waves and earthquakes as claimed by some members of the New Age crowd. As it turned out, Kohoutek fizzled and shot past Earth without incident.

Then there was the worldwide turn-of-the-century panic in the late 1990s that had corporations spending millions on computer fixes, and people around the world stocking up on Spam, water, batteries and energy bars.

The scene at the 2012 Conference here had the same giddy sense of urgency. Conference co-organizer Sharron Rose said the Maya timeline foretold "the most profound event in human history. Everything we know, everything we are, is about to undergo a substantial and radical alteration."

Exactly which direction to take, however, was unclear. The group is strikingly splintered, each focused on his or her own New Age theories: Spiritual teacher Jose Arguelles, for instance, contends that the Maya were prescient space aliens. And author Daniel Pinchbeck describes 2012 as a time for "the return of the Quetzalcoatl," the mythical feathered serpent of Mesoamerica.

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