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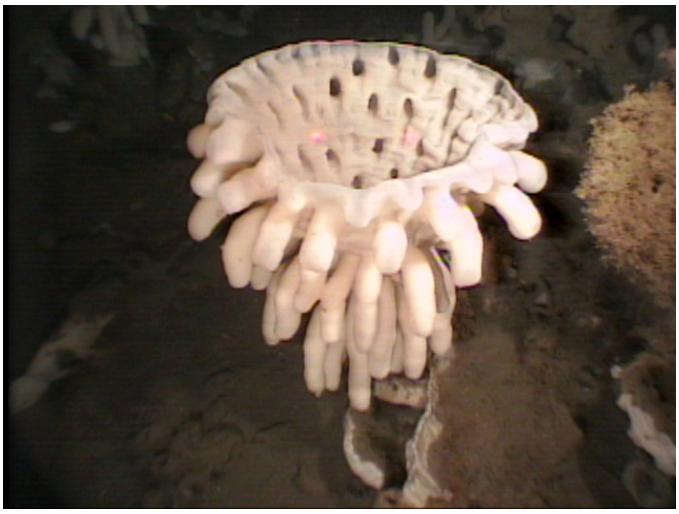
Concerns raised about Globally Unique Glass Sponge Reefs at Offshore Oil and Gas Hearings – Group demands protection now



Vancouver, October 29, 2003: At the "*Royal Society of Canada Expert Panel to Review Science Issues Related to the Moratorium on Oil and Gas Activities Offshore B.C.*", sponge reef specialist Dr. Kim Conway will highlight the global significance of the unique glass sponge reefs found only in BC's Hecate Strait.

Dr. Conway, a scientist with Natural Resources Canada, will describe how susceptible these fragile glass sponges are to damage from human activities and how little is known about the basic biology of the sponge reefs.

"For over two years, we have been calling on the federal fisheries Minister to give these sponge reefs long term protection through marine protected area (MPA) designation under the Oceans Act" stated Sabine Jessen, Conservation Director of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society. "We cannot understand why the federal government, in cooperation with the provincial government, is not proceeding with protection, especially in the face of increasing demands and interest for activities like offshore oil and gas in the vicinity of the sponges."

"We have also learned that Canada is currently preparing a list of 10 sites for nomination as World Heritage Sites by UNESCO," Jessen added. " There is nothing more globally unique or scientifically important in Canada than these sponge reefs. The only impediment to their listing is the lack of long-term protection. The governments need to get moving."

"Not only have government scientists supported MPA designation for the sponges, but so has the world expert on sponge reefs, Dr. Manfred Krautter of the University of Stuttgart," said Jessen. "Dr. Krautter has also written this week to the Canadian government urging the addition of the sponges to the World Heritage List for Canada. He is very concerned that if they do not make it onto the list now, we will have to wait another ten years for the next list of sites to be agreed on."

These fascinating sponges are found nowhere else in the world but British Columbia's Hecate Strait. In July 2002 the research team studying the sponges, including Dr. Conway, discovered damage to the most pristine of the sponge reefs. Shortly thereafter, fishing closures were imposed on the four sponge reef locations, yet these provide only short-term protection. Marine Protected Area status is needed to ensure the long-term protection of the globally unique sponge reefs from all damaging human activities.

- 30 -

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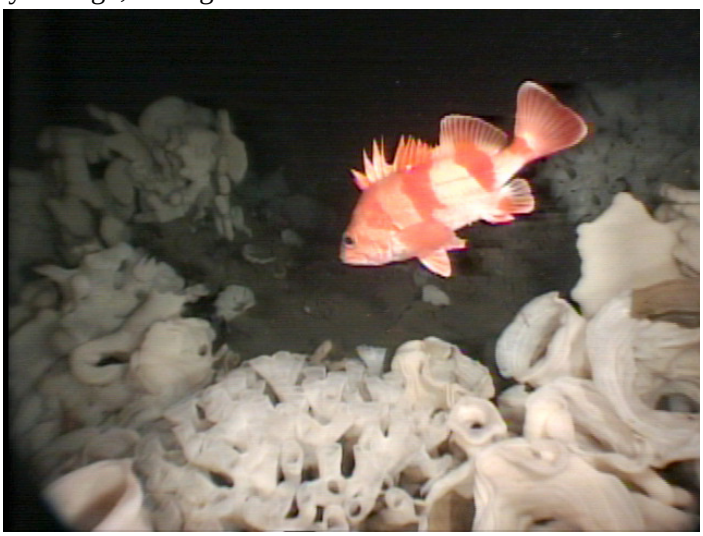
Background

The only known occurrence of these hexactinellid sponge reefs worldwide is off British Columbia in Hecate Strait. In the Late Jurassic period the sponge reefs formed a discontinuous reef belt extending more than 7000 km. This reef system was the largest biotic structure ever built on earth.

In British Columbia's Hecate Strait the sponge reefs form four reef complexes up to 300 square kilometres, covering a total area of over 700 square kilometres. The sponge reefs off the BC coast are the only know examples of living sponge reefs in the world. They have been found elsewhere only in fossilized form in southern Europe, dating back between 146 and 245 million years ago, the Age of the Dinosaurs.



The sponges on the surface of the reefs grow to more than one metre in height and are estimated to be about 300 years old. The sponges are actually glass like and quite fragile. Recent surveys by scientists from Canada and Germany have documented extensive destruction of the reefs by mobile fishing gear, i.e., trawlers. All four of the sponge reefs have been damaged, with the most recent destruction documented of the most northerly reef, which was previously considered to be the most pristine of the four sponge reefs. The Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society and others are advocating for protection of the reefs via an Oceans Act Marine Protected Area.

British Columbia has 27,000 kilometres of coastline, 6500 coastal islets, and 290,000 square kilometres of marine waters. Of this, about 1600 square kilometres, or less than 1% of BC's marine waters have some degree of protection, mostly concentrated in the coastal nearshore region. Marine protected areas (MPAs) are areas in the marine environment that have long term legal protection. They include the seabed, water column, plants and animals and their habitats. They can range in size from small to large and they can provide for different levels of protection, from harvest refugia areas that are totally closed to all consumptive and possibly other human uses, to multiple-use areas, allowing for human uses compatible with the conservation objectives of the area. In 1997 the *Canada Oceans Act* was made law, giving Fisheries and Oceans Canada the legislative authority to establish Marine Protected Areas.

The Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society is Canada's grassroots voice for wilderness. CPAWS has a demonstrated ability to achieve results on the ground. Since our founding in 1963, we have helped to protect over 100 million acres of Canada's wild areas. We are highly respected for our science-driven campaigns to establish new protected areas and to ensure that "nature comes first" in the management of existing parks. We have also established a reputation for our ability to forge strong alliances with First Nations and local communities. Since 1993, the BC Chapter of CPAWS has played a leading role in the protection of British Columbia's marine environment. We have been active on a number of fronts, including the development of policy and legislation for marine protected areas (MPAs), public awareness and education, and the identification and documentation of large marine areas as potential MPAs. We have been working with communities, First Nations, government agencies, other conservation groups, fishing organizations and others in our efforts to ensure the long-term health of the marine environment.

Pictures and video footage available!

You can see pictures and video footage on Dr. Krautter's website: http://www.porifera.org/a/cif1.htm