

Scientists soak up sponge data



Jim Galloway, left, and Kim Conway at the Institute of Ocean Sciences look at siliceous sponge from Hecate Strait. The sponges are more than 200 years old.

Debra Brash/Times Colonist

Researchers hope a recent discovery will shed light on the giant sponge reefs that once spanned the globe

BY CARLA WILSON
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Sponges flash neon colours as an underwater video camera captures the first glimpses of giant sea sponge reefs discovered recently in Georgia Strait.

Bright pinks, whites and oranges fill the water, revealing the remains of their dead, grey predecessors.

Once stretching thousands of kilometres from Portugal to the Black Sea, colonies of these large, fragile sponges are now found only in B.C. waters. Research is starting on these sponges, which may play a role as habitat for other marine animals and act as a nursery for young fish.

In Germany, many castles were built on the fossilized remains of sponge reefs.

"When these ancient reefs were most abundant was in the Upper Jurassic, which was about 140 million years ago," said Kim Conway, a physical scientist with Natural Resources Canada, who is based at the Institute of Ocean Sciences at Patricia Bay.

The European complex was "the largest reef structure ever built on earth," Conway said.

These reefs were thought to have disappeared 65 million years ago although individual sponges were known to exist. In the Pacific, specimens can be found in deep waters from Japan to California.

Sponges are primitive early animals. These filter-feeding sponges are siliceous — a common product made from silica is glass and these fragile creatures are nicknamed glass sponges. Dry them out and they easily break.

In the mid-1980s, sponge reefs were discovered in Hecate Strait, off the Queen Charlotte Islands. Each of those four complexes are about the size of the Saanich Peninsula.

Last summer, federal mapping work of the seabed using multi-beam sonar technology revealed sponge mounds about eight kilometres from the mouth of the Fraser River.

Sponge samples were taken in December and on April 19, a video camera on board a research vessel confirmed the find.

Please see SPONGES, B2