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DFO takes action to protect sponges

The Daily News

Calls to alter the boundaries of the groundfish trawl in Hecate Strait and protect ancient 'living glass' sponge reefs were answered by Fisheries and Oceans last week.

"(We're) pleased that DFO has used new information showing the actual distribution of the sponge reefs to protect the 20 per cent of the reefs that was left out of the previous closures," said Sabine Jessen, conservation director of Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, B.C. chapter (CPAWS).

"These reefs are the only known living examples of Hexactinellid, or glass, sponge reefs on Earth.

The original ground trawl closures were instituted in 2002, 14 years after the discovery of the sponge reefs. Recent surveys by Natural Resources Canada showed that the size and shape of the sponge reefs is different than what was estimated in 2002. The trawling industry has been supportive of both the original closures and the new boundaries, which has helped DFO to institute changes quickly, said Jessen.

Although CPAWS praised DFO for acting quickly to adjust closure

boundaries to protect the sponges, they say conservation measures shouldn't end there.

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"However, the sponge reefs need long term protection. We hope the ground trawl industry continues to support further measures to secure this protection."

CPAWS is calling for a groundfish trawl closure to include a five to eight kilometre buffer zone. This was recommended by DFO's science branch in 2002. The

environmental group would like the area closed to other potentially damaging fishing activities as well and is asking for similar protection for newly discovered sponge reefs in the Strait of Georgia.

"Above all, we, as Canadians, must ensure the long-term protection of these globally unique sponge reefs by designating them as marine protected areas (MPAs) under the Oceans Act," said Jessen.

"Trawl closures must be renewed yearly, whereas MPA status is protected by law and would open the way for the world's only living glass sponge reefs to receive UNESCO World Heritage Site designation."

Smaller sponge reefs have been discovered in the Strait of Georgia, including one recently located off Galiano Island. This reef is one kilometre long and 150 metres wide.

While these healthy reefs are small relative to the hundreds of square kilometres of sponge reefs in the Hecate Strait, they provide significant habitat to local populations of rockfish and are relevant to achieving conservation objectives in the proposed Southern Strait of Georgia National Marine Conservation Area.