

The News

Safety sought for glass sponges

By FRED DAVIES News Reporter

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Found nowhere else on earth and until recently considered extinct, reef-forming glass sponges proved a popular draw at the Association of Vancouver Island and Coastal Communities annual meeting held last weekend in Qualicum Beach.

"They're not found anywhere else in the world. It's not often I come home and speak to my children for half an hour after a municipal meeting," said Parksville councillor Teresa Patterson. "I did find it one of the more interesting workshops."

An original discovery in 1989 of four large reefs in Hecate Strait by surveyors working for Natural Resources Canada was "akin to finding dinosaurs roaming the earth," said Megan Baker, a marine program assistant with the Canadian Parks & Wilderness Society. "The individual sponges that make up a reef are one single cell and their skeletons are made of glass."

CPAWS presented a workshop to AVICC delegates in a bid to create marine protected areas that will safeguard the spectacular reefs, some as tall as eight stories and located at depths of up to 250 metres.

"I've seen video footage and they are phenomenal," said Baker. "There's all sorts of animals and different organisms swimming around in them."

Scientists had thought reef-forming glass sponges went extinct millions of years ago. Everything known about them came from fossilized records until the recent discoveries off B.C.'s coast.

Baker said the reefs in Hecate Strait cover about 1,000 sq. km but there have since been sponges found along the coast and some in the Strait of Georgia, including one approximately four square kilometers in the waters near Parksville.

Now scientists and researchers are busy trying to find ways to protect cold water coral reefs, particularly from the destruction of bottom trawling.

"The reefs themselves had an application for UNESCO designation but were unable to get it," says Baker. "The Department of Fisheries and Oceans put a trawl closure in place in 2002 and extended it to 2006 but it has to be renewed every year ... We'd like to see marine protected area status."

At the AVICC meeting a resolution forwarded from Comox-Strathcona Regional District seeking such protection was adopted and will go on to the Union of BC Municipalities for further consideration.

The three-dimensional structure of the reefs provides complex habitat for many species and contributes to the sustainability of local fisheries, including rockfish, reddish and lingcod. Little in fact is known about cold water corals in B.C. and knowledge of their distribution relies on computer modeling that may lead to more discoveries.

What is known is they are not likely to be found anywhere else due to a convergence of factors unique to the B.C. coastline.

These include silica rich waters used for the formation of glass, water temperatures of between four and six degrees C and the rocky fjords, which collect sediment in their sills, preventing damage to the reefs below.

"Used as a checklist, B.C is the only place where these factors come together," said Baker.

Asked about the response to CPAWS workshops at the recent AVICC meeting, Baker confirms the enthusiasm expressed by local politicians. "People were thrilled. It was such a fantastic response."



Submitted Photo

Rare, reef-forming glass sponges are the subject of an AVICC resolution to the provincial municipal organization, to see their natural habitat in B.C. protected.