

# B.C. waters home to unique clusters of sponge reefs

## Delicate sponges, cold-water corals provide habitat for many species

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They live on the sea floor at depths of about 200 metres, in mounds up to 20 metres high and many kilometres wide.

Still, many people don't know B.C.'s cold-water corals and sponge reefs even exist and are unique to the waters of Hecate Strait and the west coast of Vancouver Island.

The low-key sea creatures have an image problem, to be sure.

"The cold-water corals are found up and down the B.C. coast," said Sabine Jessen, conservation director for the B.C. Chapter of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS).

"There are corals in Hecate Strait, too, but there are also these ancient glass-sponge reefs. They're not found in living reefs like this anywhere else in the world.

"They're called glass sponges because they are made of silicon and are quite brittle. They've been growing in reefs for over 9,000 years."

The problem is that 50 per cent of these reefs have been destroyed by bottom trawling, said Jessen.

"We've been asking for years now that the minister for fisheries and oceans declare the sponge reefs as marine protected areas and that they create a buffer zone around them."

Now CPAWS has invited one of the world's leading sponge experts to B.C. to give public talks in nine coastal communities on how important the critters really are.

A sponge can grow up to 1.5 metres high and 80-90 cm in diameter, said Dr. Manfred Krautter, of the University of Stuttgart in Germany.

"They're fairly big and grow fairly slow. Some may be several hundred years old and are very, very brittle. If you touch them, you can easily break them."

Krautter first heard about the sponges in 1991 after reading an article by the Geological Survey of Canada about living sponges similar to the fossilized ones he'd studied in Europe.

"I couldn't really believe what I was reading. The article described something that nobody on Earth before ever knew still existed, these sponge reefs."

A cluster of sponge reefs in Hecate Strait covers 425 square kilometres while others closer to Queen Charlotte Sound cover 1,000 square kilometres, "which is fairly small, actually," said Krautter.

"These are really the last of their kind. These have existed for 200 million years, since the days when dinosaurs roamed around."

Sponges and corals provide crucial habitat for rockfish, clams, shrimp and other fish species.

A recent UVic study found 10 times more juvenile rockfish inside the sponge reefs than outside.

The only information researchers have gleaned about B.C. corals comes from their accidental capture in fish nets off the coast, said Jessen.

"There's no directed scientific research on the corals."

These species are at risk as technology makes fishing more efficient, said Jessen.

"There used to be places in the ocean that we couldn't get to, and now we do. The corals and sponges that used to be safe aren't safe anymore.

"Because they don't exist anywhere else in the world, Canada has a global responsibility to protect them."

Krautter will speak about the issue on Friday at Galiano Island Community Centre, next Monday at UVic's downtown campus, on Nov. 8 at the Courtenay and District Museum, and on Nov. 9 at Port Hardy Secondary School. All talks start at 7:30 p.m.