

Undersea World of Glass

Georgia Strait sponge reefs need protection

by Megan Baker

When you take the B.C. ferry between Vancouver and Victoria you see islands, seals, and if you're lucky, orcas. But what you don't see, hidden beneath the waves, is an underwater world of glass.

Finger Goblet and Cloud sponges—delicate sea animals—build on their dead and form incredible three-dimensional reefs on the sea floor. Their bodies are made of silica, the building block of glass. Thus, the reefs these creatures create are highly fragile.

Their reefs are also extremely important, as they provide homes to an abundance of marine animals, including rockfish, octopus, sea



Location of glass sponge reefs in the Strait of Georgia.



Glass sponge reefs are made of silica hence the origin of their name. Photos: Dr. Manfred Krautter



Glass sponge reefs are beautiful but also harbour a great deal of marine life. Photos: Dr. Manfred Krautter

Mayne and Malcolm Islands, as well as the mouth of the Fraser River, the Sunshine Coast and West Vancouver. Our own Mr. Stinky, a single glass sponge used in our campaigns, came to us from these reefs in the Southern Strait of Georgia.

These very fragile glass sponge reefs in Georgia Strait have been overlooked in efforts to date to protect them from damaging activities, including bottom trawling.

Much effort is underway to

protect the other, much larger glass sponge reefs in Hecate Strait. Combined, these massive northern sponge reefs extend 1000 kilometres. Their discovery in the late 1980s stunned the scientific community who thought that the reefs had been extinct for 40 million years. Although suitable for World Heritage status today, these northern reefs still lack permanent protection. Concern will continue to swirl over their future, until they are safe.

Found more recently, the reefs in the Southern Strait of Georgia live in relatively shallow waters (compared to the northern reefs) and are therefore more accessible for research purposes, but also more vulnerable to damage from human activities. They are also invaluable.

Currently, the glass sponge reefs in the Strait of Georgia have no protection at all. We need to see fishing closures put in place for all of the southern reefs as a first step, and ultimately, Marine Protected Area status.

CPAWS-BC recently co-hosted a Glass Sponge Reef Symposium in Sidney, B.C., with Natural Resources Canada and the University of Alberta, where scientists from around the world gathered to present their latest findings and discuss what research and conservation steps need to be taken.

So much about the glass sponge reefs remains a mystery and we need

cucumbers and shrimp. Ranging in colour from creamy white to dark yellow and found in depths of about 90 metres, each reef stretches approximately one-kilometre square.

These stunning and globally-unique reefs are found near Galiano, to ensure that they are protected, before we lose any more to the impact from human activities. Scientists have estimated that 50 percent of the glass sponge reefs have already been destroyed.

CPAWS-BC is working with Fisheries and Oceans Canada to develop a conservation strategy for the sponges and coldwater corals on Canada's Pacific coast. In November 2008, we held a second workshop with stakeholders to take the process to the next step.

You can help too! Please write a letter to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, urging that Canada permanently protect the globally unique glass sponge reefs, both the southern and northern ones!

Talk to your MLA and MP. And tell your friends about the glass sponge reefs. Help ensure that the incredible glass sponge reefs are protected forever.