

Marine census nears completion

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SAN DIEGO, (AP) -- From pole to pole, surface to frigid depths, researchers have discovered thousands of new ocean creatures in a decade-long effort now nearing completion, and there may still be several times more strange creatures to be found, leaders of the Census of Marine Life reported Thursday at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

The effort has "given us a much clearer window into marine life," said Shirley Pomponi, executive director of the Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute at Florida Atlantic University in Fort Pierce.

The research, which has involved thousands of scientists from around the world, got under way in 2000 and the final report is scheduled to be released in London on Oct. 4.

Last fall the census reported having added 5,600 new ocean species to those already known. Ron O'Dor, a professor at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Canada, said there may be another 100,000 or more to be found. "Add microbes and it could be millions," he said.

One benefit of learning more about ocean life is the chance of finding new medical treatments, Pomponi said.

For example, a chemical discovered in deep water sponges is now a component of the cream used to treat herpes infections, Pomponi said. Other research is under way on pain killers and cancer treatments based on ocean life.

Kristina Gjerde, of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, in Konstancin-Chylice, Poland, said the research will help guide governments in setting up marine protected areas to preserve species both for food and of value for other reasons.

O'Dor said the ocean is large and resilient, so that when a region is protected life there can rebound, "but we can't keep insulting the ocean."

O'Dor noted that many people are concerned about the decline of tigers in the wild, and said the same may be true of great white sharks.

Noting a marine census project that places sonar trackers on fish and marine mammals, O'Dor pointed to an Australian program that senses those trackers and warns people ashore when to close a beach because a shark is nearby.

"See, we can coexist," he said.

Huw Griffiths of the British Antarctic Survey told the gathering that Antarctic sea life is far more than penguins. There are 8,000 species there, most living on the bottom, he said, and they have found novel ways to survive the bitter cold.

But global warming is changing conditions there, with a decline in ice that affect these species and others.

Indeed, O'Dor noted that some squid formerly found only in tropical areas are now migrating to polar regions as climate changes.

Jason Hall-Spencer of the Marine Institute at the University of Plymouth, England, warned that as the ocean absorbs more carbon dioxide from the air it becomes more acid, which can kill some marine creatures, including corals.

On the Net:

Census of Marine Life: www.coml.org

Global Ocean Biodiversity Initiative: www.gobi.org