

## ENVIRONMENT

# Expedition sets out for deep-sea coral forests

At-risk, unexplored B.C. ecosystem to be studied by researchers in one-man submarines

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VANCOUVER SUN

A deep-sea expedition will leave Vancouver today to explore the mysterious coral forests in the Hecate Strait and Queen Charlotte Sound in the hopes of protecting the delicate ecosystem.

Trawl nets have pulled more than 295,000 kilograms of deep-sea coral from B.C.'s waters since 1996, according to the Living Ocean Society, which is spearheading the expedition.

"These animals are not heavy, so that's a lot of coral," said the society's Jennifer Lash.

Coral is essential to the ocean ecosystem, said Texas A&M University scientist Tom Shirley, who will be on the expedition.

Alaskan research has shown that deep-sea coral provides protection, food stocks and spawning grounds for fish, crabs, shrimp and other invertebrates, Shirley said.

The deep-sea creatures grow in groves and reach up to three metres (10

feet) tall at depths of 30-500 metres. Unlike their hard, colourful counterparts in the tropics, deep-sea corals are flexible so they can sway with the tides.

When the corals are ripped up by trawl nets, they can take up to 100 years to grow back, if at all, said Lash. They reproduce by cross-fertilizing, so if too many are wiped out, they can't procreate.

Other jurisdictions, including Alaska, Washington, Oregon and California, have placed limits on trawler activity in marine protected areas, which include coral groves but the Canadian authorities haven't kept step.

"At this point in time, we lack the information to impose any sort of protective measures," said Fisheries and Oceans Canada's Greg Workman, who will be on the expedition.

Workman said the locations and ecological benefits of the corals are unknown. The six-person, privately funded research team hopes to help the province catch up. The team—which is leaving from the Burrard Dry Dock Pier—will spend two weeks studying

the deep-sea coral groves using one-man subs invented by Nuytco, a North Vancouver company.

Workman hopes they'll find a wealth of information about coral distribution and habitat preferences, which could lead to a policy for their management. Such a policy could mean a halt to trawling in certain areas.

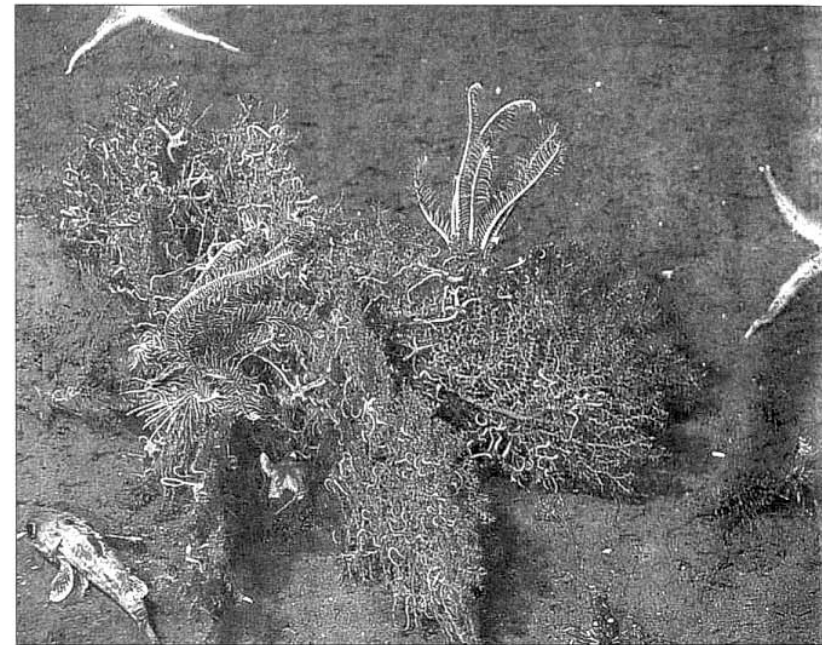
"When you talk closures, you impact citizens' livelihoods, so it's best that we consider the best location and balance the impacts of the fishery and the fishery's impacts on the corals," said Workman.

Lash and Shirley are confident fishermen will accept closures when the time comes.

"All of these fishermen are very interested in the long-term preservation of their livelihood, said Shirley of his experience with Alaskan fishermen. "They want to do the right thing so the fish will be around for a long time."

They'd also prefer not to have to pull coral from their nets, Shirley said.

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DEPARTMENT OF FISHERIES AND OCEANS

This deep-sea coral called *Swiftia* is one of the many species the Living Oceans Society expedition hopes to explore over the next two weeks.