

# Warped

by Scott McCullar



## Exotic

### A&M researchers find odd creatures in Gulf

University News Service

Exotic sea creatures have been discovered thriving deep in the Gulf of Mexico in a region polluted by oil and gas seeping naturally from beneath the ocean floor.

Reporting in Nature Magazine, a six-man team of Texas A&M oceanographers said it found dense communities of clams, tube worms and other animals at a depth of about 1,800 feet in an area 150 miles off the Louisiana coast. The creatures apparently feed on bacteria that exist with no sunlight. Sunlight is required for photosynthesis.

Rather than photosynthesis, the scientists speculate the bacteria use a process called chemosynthesis as an energy source for growth. These bacteria also appear to be feeding on the hydrocarbons that seep from the Gulf floor.

"This report significantly expands the geographical area in which one would expect to find such communities in the deep ocean," Dr. Mahlon Kennicutt II said. "It also suggests that oil and gas seeping to the surface from deeper hydrocarbon reservoirs can support, by chemosynthesis, vent-type organisms in the deep ocean."

Hydrocarbon seepage occurs naturally in many ocean shelf and slope

regions, Kennicutt said, making it probable that these sea creatures are more widely distributed than previous discoveries suggested.

The discoveries were made last December and May when the research team — made of Kennicutt, James M. Brooks, Robert R. Bidigare, Roger R. Fay, Terry L. Wade and Thomas J. McDonald — trawled through a region where they had earlier discovered the occurrence of gas hydrates, icelike formations of methane and water that may have potential as an unconventional energy source.

Chemical analyses were performed on the organisms to determine their food source.

Like other exotic communities recently reported at hydrothermal vents and a Florida Escarpment saline seep, the oil seeps contain hydrogen sulfide which can be used as an energy source by sulfur-oxidizing bacteria that are then eaten by the other animals. But, unlike other finds, the Louisiana seeps also leak hydrocarbons that appear to play a part in the food chain too, explained Kennicutt.

"This is an area of active seepage," he said. "We saw oil rising to the surface. Given what we know about pollution, one might not expect to find biological communities that are thriving. But we did."

The researchers plan to return to the site next year with the Johnson Sealink I submersible to learn more about where the animals actually live. They also may perform studies at the site aboard a Navy submarine.

Their findings include two new species of tube worms and a slender black tube worm that may represent a new class.

"We want to learn how these animals can live in such toxic compounds and what special mechanisms make it possible," Kennicutt said.

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— A&M oceanographer Dr. Mahlon Kennicutt

## Clue found to Alzheimer's disease

Associated Press

DALLAS — Researchers have identified a new kind of abnormality in the brains of people with Alzheimer's disease that could be the best clue yet to the cause of the debilitating affliction.

The scientists found that the disease produces unusual changes in the fibers that serve as "skeletons" inside brain cells to help the cells hold their shape.

No one believes these fibers are the cause of the disease, said Dr. Daniel Selkoe of Harvard Medical School Sunday. But, he said, they are an important step closer to the cause.

Scientists have known for a long time that the brains of Alzheimer's disease patients contain microscopic fibrous tangles and hardened deposits called plaques, but where these tangles and plaques came from was not known.

Selkoe and other researchers have now shown that the tangles and

plaques contain some of the same proteins, or portions of the proteins, that are contained in the cytoskeletal fibers in normal brain cells, or neurons.

The finding adds to indications that the cause of Alzheimer's may lie in the process controlling formation of the cytoskeletal structures.

Further, it allows scientists for the first time to begin using the powerful techniques of gene-splicing to fight Alzheimer's. They can now use that gene to track Alzheimer's disease in the unusual cases where it is inherited in families, Selkoe said.

While in many cases family members of Alzheimer's victims appear to have an unexplained predisposition to develop it, only rarely is the disease passed on like classic hereditary diseases, such as cystic fibrosis.

The reason for the variability could be that several genes may control the disease. These genes could interact in different ways in different individuals.

At present, there is no cure for Alzheimer's, and nothing can be done even to alleviate its symptoms or to detect it early, before symptoms appear.

About 20 percent of the U.S. population will eventually get Alzheimer's, and the number of cases is increasing as the population ages, said Dr. Clifford Saper of the University of Chicago during the neuroscience meeting. In about 35 years, one in four Americans will be over age 65, he said.

Care for Alzheimer's victims now costs \$20 billion a year, Saper said.

The disease, which causes at least 100,000 deaths a year, was first described in 1907 by Alois Alzheimer, a German psychiatrist. Alzheimer noted the symptoms: a progressive loss of memory and mental function and eventual inability to speak or perform routine tasks.

Alzheimer was the first to note the tangles and plaques that occur in the brains of those with the illness.



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