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Scientists expect as many as 5,000 new fish species in census of oceans

By John Heilprin
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Scuttling and floating almost two miles below the North Atlantic are a ghostly, foot-tall octopus with fins sprouting from its head, a soft coral with starry feathers and a flower-like creature with the body of a worm.

Researchers showed otherworldly film of those and other creatures Thursday, demonstrating an unprecedented marine census that is discovering more than 30 new species of animal and plant life every week. And those three don't even necessarily count.

"They can't even be described as a new species until we have a specimen," Mike Vecchione, a Smithsonian biologist, said of the deep-sea dive footage publicly screened for the first time at the National Museum of Natural History.

Scientists reporting their first findings since the project began in May 2000 said that by the time they're finished in 2010, they may have found more than 2 million different species of marine life.

"People have tended to look where it's easy ... and there's so much more to be found," said Jesse Ausubel, environmental scientist at The Rockefeller University in New York City. "We have discriminated in the past in favor of a very small number of species."

Three hundred scientists from 53 countries are working on the decade-long census to learn the number of different species and catalogue them. So far, the Census of Marine Life includes 15,304 different species of fish and 194,696 to 214,696 — there's disagreement among the experts — species of

animals and plants. So far, the research is coming up with about 150 to 200 previously unknown species of fish and 1,700 new species of other aquatic animals and plants each year.

The scientists said they believe the oceans that extend across 70 percent of Earth's surface hold about 20,000 species of fish and up to 1.98 million species of animals and plants. Many of those could be basic and small life forms, such as worms and jellyfish.

"We've tended to be interested in the things that we eat," said Ausubel, who helps run the census for the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, which provided \$20 million in funding. "We've tended not to be interested in the things that pass through our nets or don't taste good. But the small critters are tremendously important in the ecosystem ... and in an evolutionary sense, the small things came first. They're ancient, and they're survivors."

Scientists hope to gain a better understanding of life in the mostly unexplored seas. Environmentalists are looking to the data to counter overfishing and pollution that has depleted the ocean's resources. Industry hopes it will lead to more efficient fishing and shipping, new pharmaceuticals and industrial compounds.

"We have primarily studied a few hundred species that are of commercial importance," said Ronald O'Dor, a marine biologist at Dalhousie University in Canada and the project's chief scientist.

"Our goal by 2010 is to know as much about life in the oceans as we know about life on land now," he said. "No one would claim that we know everything about life on land. There are probably still a few hundred thousand beetles in

Census of the seas

A huge effort by scientists to document life in the world's oceans is under way. The project will be ongoing for 10 years and involves researchers from all over the globe. Seven zones make up the initial field research areas.



1 Tagging of Pacific Pelagics

Researchers will study movements and behaviors of large open-ocean animals.

2 Pacific Ocean Salmon Tracking

New tagging technology will be used to study the marine life of Pacific salmon.

3 Gulf of Maine Project

Dynamic ecosystem that has undergone major changes in the diversity of its habitat.

4 Mid-Atlantic Ridge Ecosystem

Relatively unexplored deep ocean that will be studied to learn how seamounts and ridge systems may influence ocean circulation.

5 Census of Diversity of Abyssal Marine Life

Vast sediment-covered plains deep on the ocean floor will be studied to determine historical factors regulating biodiversity.

6 Natural Geography In Shore Areas

Vast and shallow area along the shore where a relatively low-tech sampling system will encourage local participation.

7 Biogeography of Deep-Water Chemosynthetic Ecosystems

Underwater mountain chains so deep that the sun's light never reaches the organisms living there.

SOURCE: Census of Marine Life

tropical forests that haven't been described. But we'd like to aim for parity."

The project grew from scientists' concerns following a 1995 National Academy of Sciences report that human population growth was quickly changing the diversity of life in the oceans, possibly irreversibly.

So far, about \$70 million has

been spent on the census. Its price tag eventually is expected to reach \$1 billion, most of it from participating governments.

"We know we won't have counted every animal," said J. Frederick Grassle, director of Rutgers University's Institute of Marine & Coastal Sciences, the chairman of the project's scientific steering committee.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Army truck hazards firefighter death

FORT RUCKER, Ala. (AP) — The Army knew of safety hazards with a fire engine used on many bases but did nothing until after a firefighter was killed by a runaway truck, according to a newspaper report.

The Dothan Eagle said records it obtained detail a history of problems with the type of Ameritek truck used by fire departments on many Army bases.

Those documents also say that a \$356 kit was designed to prevent accidental drive-offs by the trucks, but it wasn't installed at Fort Rucker before the death of Kerry Neis, 31, during a training exercise Dec. 4, the newspaper said.

Army investigators cited human error as a factor in the death. But after the accident, the Army had the kit installed in all 250 of its Ameritek 2500L fire trucks, including the 33 at Fort Rucker, the Army's aviation training center.

Detroit adult group home fire kills two, injures 11

By Jim Irwin
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DETROIT — Fire ripped through a home for mentally and physically impaired adults early Thursday, killing two of the 13 people inside, authorities said. Eleven people were injured.

The fire appeared to have started shortly before dawn on the first floor of the three-story home, fire officials said.

Sophia Moss, the resident manager, said she went door-to-door trying to get everybody out, but the blaze quickly forced her outside.

"I was helpless," said a tearful Moss as she stood across from the home. "I wanted to go back in but I knew I couldn't."

Some residents jumped about 7 feet from their second-story windows.

"We told them, 'Jump,

jump,' because the fire was so profuse," Moss said.

One resident carried a wheelchair-bound man out the back door, said Moss, who suffered minor injuries and was treated at the scene.

The two people who died were on the third floor, Detroit Fire Chief Lee Moore said.

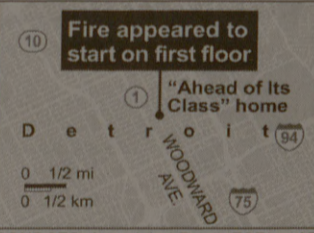
Authorities were investigating the cause of the blaze, which blackened the home's window frames and melted its vinyl siding.

Broadcast reports said a third person died at a hospital, but Moore said fire officials were aware of only two deaths, and the hospital couldn't confirm a third death.

DelMarie Headd, who opened the home 10 years ago, said she was trying to arrange accommodations for the surviving residents, who were Medicaid or Social Security dis-

Fire at adult care facility kills two

Fire broke out at a group home for mentally and physically disabled adults early Thursday, killing at least two of the 13 people inside.



SOURCES: Associated Press; ESRI AP

ability recipients.

The facility was licensed by the city and passed a Fire Department inspection several months ago, Headd said.

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