

Star-News

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By Gareth McGrath
Staff Writer

They are some of the world's oldest, richest and least understood underwater habitats, full of coral mounds sprouting hundreds of feet high and species scientists have never seen before.

And they happen to be in our backyard, a three-hour boat ride off the Cape Fear Coast.

Now environmentalists want to see these deepwater reefs protected, and they're hoping a president possibly looking to spruce up his environmental legacy before he leaves qhLeg" oki jv" jgnr"vjgo" fq"kv"Vjg" reefs cover an area nearly the size of South Carolina.

"What we think exists now is the same opportunity in the deep sea that existed in the American West in the early 20th Century," said Doug Rader, Environmental Defense Fund's chief oceans scientist, referring to the establishment of many of the country's most famous national parks.

That the waters off the Southeast have deepwater coral reefs has been known for decades.

But it's only recently that the deep-sea reefs have drawn national attention, largely because researchers previously had no way of getting to them.

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"We're just scratching the surface down there," said Steve Ross, a research professor at the University of North Carolina Wilmington who has been exploring the reefs for nearly a decade. "Almost every fkgx"gxgt{"gzrgfkwpq."ygotg"lpfkipi"

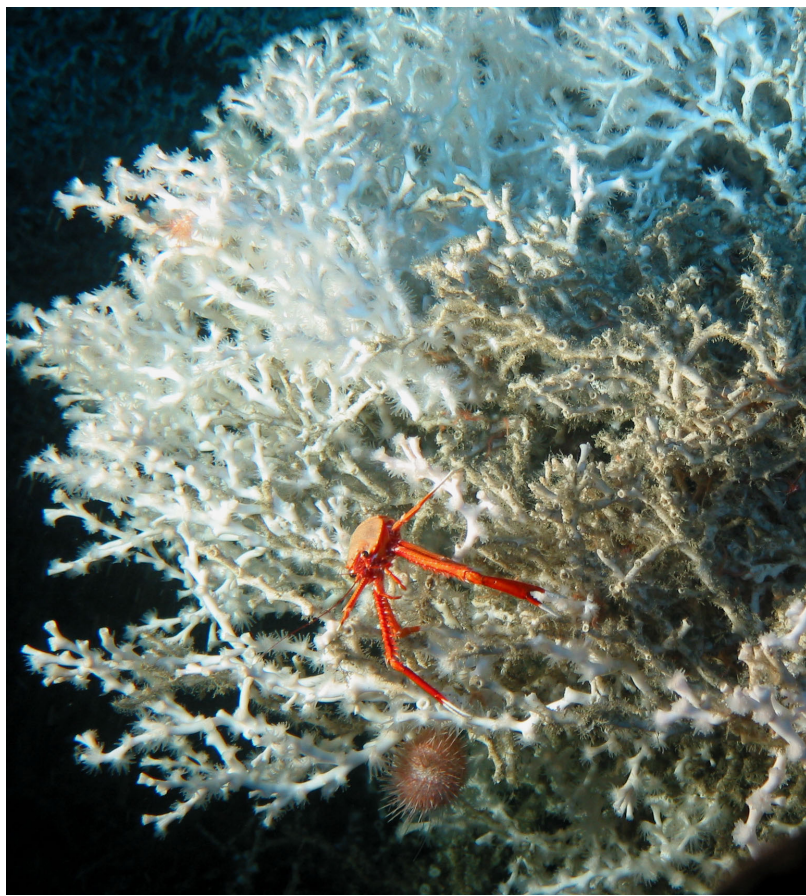


PHOTO COURTESY OF UNCW

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something new."

That includes new species of coral-nkmg"j {ftqkfu."etcd"cpf"gxgp"Lu j0

Tquu'uckf'uekgpvkuvu"cnug"ctg"lpfkipi" vjcv"vjg" fqt"cpf"hcwpc"cv"gej"tggh" cluster could be genetically distinct, much like the uniqueness found among species in the Galapagos Islands.

"It's almost the same type of thing on a scale that we didn't expect," he

said, his eyes getting a bit bigger as jg'ucv'kp"jku"qhLeg"cv"WPE Y"o"Egpgvt" for Marine Science.

But the same technology aiding scientists in their research also could allow these largely untouched deep-sea areas to be explored and potentially mined for oil, gas or mineral deposits to feed the country's seemingly insatiable appetite for engti {"0kpetgcugf"Lu jkpi."gurgekmn{"hqt" deep-sea species, is also a worry.

"They're very fragile, slow-growing, and it wouldn't take much to really damage them," Rader said of the reefs and their animal inhabitants.

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, which manages Lu jkpi'kp'hgfgtcn"y cvgtu'kp'vjg"Uqwj-east, is looking at declaring the coral reefs "Habitat Areas of Particular Concern." But a presidential declaration, such as one declaring the reefs national monuments, would add even more layers of protection - although Rader stressed that no one was pushing for the reefs.

Holding a small piece of Lophelia coral, the predominant deepwater coral, Ross said the reefs are found in water about 52 degrees and colder

and at depths starting at about 1,000 feet and going much deeper.

Along with extensive coral formations, the reefs can include massive, million-year-old mounds formed by a mix of coral and trapped sediment. In the Cape Fear Lophelia Bank located about 60 miles off Bald Head Island, these natural columns extend nearly 250 feet up from the ocean bottom.

But exploring an underwater area well away from shore that's only reachable with remote-operated vehicles is very expensive, with research expeditions costing as much as \$30,000 a day.

A federal designation for the area could open up more funding sources for reef research, Ross said, along with raising public awareness about the rich but fragile habitats just off our shores.

President Bush hasn't exactly been seen as a friend of the environmental movement during his nearly eight {gctu"kp"qhLeg"Rtgukf'gpvu."jqy'gxgt." have a history of wanting to leave a lasting legacy, and that's what the environmental community is banking on.

There also is recent precedent for this. Two years ago, Bush created the 140,000-square-mile Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Marine National Monument, which is the world's largest protected marine area.

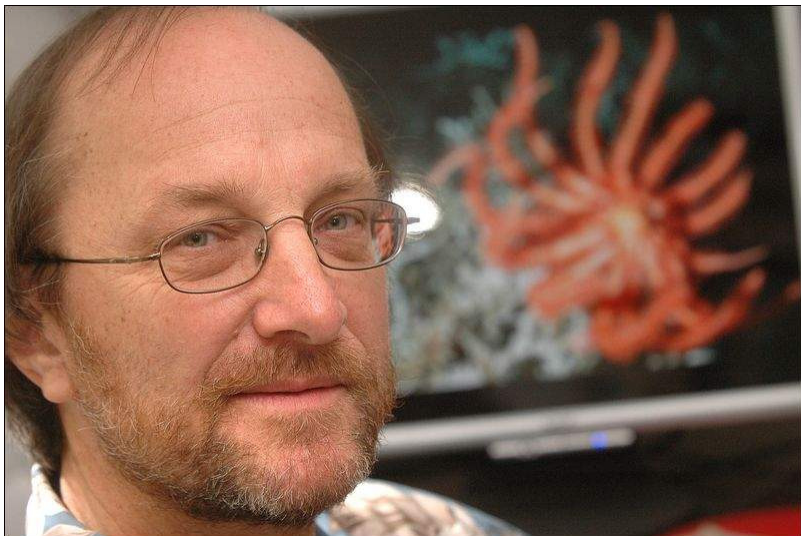
The White House has yet to take a position on the idea of designating the Southeast's reefs a marine national monument. But last month South Carolina's Republican Gov. Mark Sanford came out in favor of the proposal, calling the deepwater habitats a "national treasure on par with Yosemite Valley and the Northwest Hawaiian Islands."

Tc'fgt'uckf'qh'Lecknu"cnug"j'cxg'dggp" in touch with Gov. Mike Easley here in North Carolina and his compatriots in Georgia and Florida to see about garnering their support.

"We think this is the perfect time to start shaping the thinking about these commonly held resources as exploration proceeds instead of trying to plug holes in the dyke as situations develop," he said.

Ross agrees.

"Yes, it's hard to get to. Yes, few people will ever get a chance to see it. And yes, we don't know a lot about these reefs right now," Ross said. "But I don't think we're going to do this."



STAFF PHOTO | KEN BLEVINS

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