

Morning Star

Established in 1867 ★

Sunday, August 25, 2002

Wilmington, N.C.

50¢

Bringing the ocean to schools

BY GARETH MCGRATH

Staff Writer

It's only been in the last few years that researchers have begun exploring the little-known deep reef habitats that pepper North Carolina's continental shelf.

"That's a function of this being a difficult habitat to work in," said Steve Ross, research coordinator with the N.C. Coastal Reserve Program, earlier this month onboard the research vessel Seward Johnson during the most recent exploration of the deepwater hard-bottom habitats. "Science doesn't get a chance to work out here very often."

Using nets, high-tech sensors and a miniature submersible capable of independent dives lasting up to four hours, researchers are discovering new species and slowly filling in the blanks on the maps during the explorations sponsored by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

It's cutting-edge research using state-of-the-art technology that's generating new and exciting data about a mysterious area just off the North Carolina coast—and just the kind of thing to stimulate a young person's

interest in marine science.

"It's got that 'cool' factor," said Lundie Spence, marine education specialist with N.C. Sea Grant. Saturday, 20 teachers from around North Carolina gathered at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington's Center for Marine Science for a workshop designed to explain NOAA's Ocean Exploration expeditions and how to incorporate the missions into science curriculums.

"This information is new and exciting," Dr. Spence said, "and it's happening right now. If you waited for this data to appear in textbooks, you'd be waiting 20 years."

Classroom tools include lesson plans for students in grades 5-12 that were created by teachers—not scientists—who participated in the expeditions.

There's also a mission Web site loaded with pictures, graphs, maps and short films describing what the researchers have found, the equipment they used and information about the habitat they are exploring.

A daily log also gives students a feel for what it's like to be on a research vessel for weeks at a time.

"We write about what we do, including the nonresearch stuff—what we eat, bad weather, trash we

find in the water—to give them a real picture of what it's like out here," said Liz Baird, coordinator of distance learning for the N.C. Museum of Natural Sciences, who was one of the educators onboard the Seward Johnson during the expedition leg off Wilmington earlier this month.

Friday night, the teachers toured the N.C. Aquarium at Fort Fisher, which has three exhibits based on the hard-bottom habitats found offshore.

Peggy Sloan, the aquarium's education curator and one of the coordinators of this weekend's workshop, said she envisions the facility offering students an onshore opportunity to see what the scientists are exploring 60 miles offshore.

"This is a great time to get into the schools because it is exciting what they're finding out there," she said, "and it's happening right off our coast."

To learn more about NOAA's Islands in the Stream 2002 mission, visit <http://oceanexplorer.noaa.gov/explorations/02sab/welcome.html>

Or contact N.C. Aquarium's Peggy Sloan at 458-8257, ext. 230, or N.C. Sea Grant's Lundie Spence at (919) 515-3012.