

Research Cruise (JR15003)- Ascension Island

Day 3 – Stucky Bottoms and a sea bum

Dr Judith Brown

Day three started for me at night and “oh what a night”. Out on deck with radio in hand and oodles of anticipation we lowered the underwater camera over the side for the first pictures from our second transect site to the North of Ascension. Once the camera (which is mounted on a metal tripod) is over the side and submerged I radioed to the team inside to turn on its lights. Like a glowing Eiffel tower it descends into the darkness and it’s time to stand by the winch man and watch the screen as the camera heads towards the seabed. Once stationary on the seabed a quick radio check that the image is captured and logged and then a nod to the winch man to lift the camera and move 5 metres before lowering again for the next image capture. But tonight’s entertainment was not just the exciting bottom dwellers we were seeing on the screen – a call from Dave who was watching over the side of the vessel and suddenly all abandoned their posts (well thankfully not the winch man or the captain!) for the cry was for charismatic megafauna.

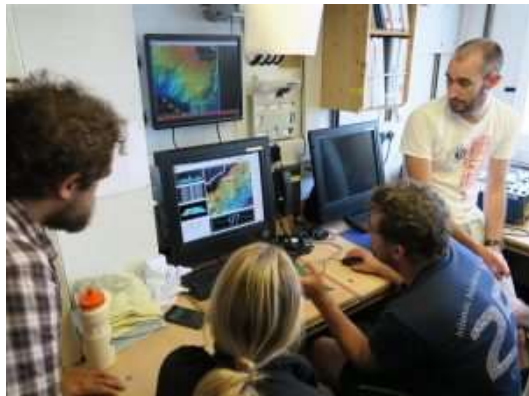


Bottlenose dolphins (a pod of about 8) were darting around in the ship lights just below where we were working. Thud, sploosh – a flying fish – the dolphins were herding them towards the vessel and one took flight and smashed into the side of the ship falling into the sea stunned and unable to escape making a tasty morsel for the awaiting cetaceans. Whoosh, thud – this time one landed on deck. Sam picked it up (unfortunately it was very dead) and held out its huge pectoral fins which it uses to glide.

Andy rushed it to the freezer – he said for a scientific sample but having heard they are rather tasty I wonder if it will end up on his dinner plate....



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Later that night at the 900m camera deployment came the cry “the sucs is stuck”. The shallow underwater camera system had become wedged under a ledge and wasn’t coming out in a hurry. Thankfully it was on the last image for that site and after a lot of patience and some tactical manoeuvres it was freed and brought safely to the surface with only a few minor scratches. Before it became stuck a most fascinating image was taken – one can only describe it as a large pink smooth bottom! This fleshy object now known as a sea bum puzzled those at first glance – but on further examination of the video footage just prior to the

photo shows a bright red anemone on a sea whip – the camera must have disturbed it causing it to retract its soft tentacles inside the fleshy bum!

Next up were the trawls for this site – having seen the rough terrain at the 900m site it was decided best not to trawl there so we started at the shallowest site – whilst not a huge haul in abundance terms the diversity of taxon was good, a bright red deep water prawn, crinoids (feather stars) and to keep Chester happy a brittle star. The camera footage had shown the second 250m site was also a sandy bottom but alas not all the habitat was so – the second net became stuck and again the skill of the winch man and the captain were called upon to free the net and bring our precious samples to the surface. The third site, and definitely sand on the images, was not all sand in reality. This time the net got properly stuck and again the skill of the captain and calmness of those in the UIC were called upon to once again bring the net to the surface in one piece. As we tidied the lab Chester brought in a bucket – not a remaining sample but a storm petrel that he found stunned on the deck during the night. Fully recovered now he released it over the side skimming over the sea surface into the distance– another project has funded genetic work on this species of storm petrel to see if it is a new species – we are awaiting the results!



With the excitement of the trawls complete more sedate science was up next with the captain taking a leisurely cruise along the 100m contour to collect the missing multibeam data and help plan the third site shallowest survey location. Luckily for us this track took us down the coast past Boatswainbird Island and as the sun shone the frigate birds circled overhead and the bottlenose dolphins returned and leaped in the wake of the bow. “SHARK!” shouted Kate, and the paparazzi on the monkey deck swung their cameras in the direction she was pointing – the very distinctive shape of a hammerhead right at the

surface, cruised on by. Time to leave the scenery behind and get back to work and start the camera surveys on our third site – this time on the south of the island – an area where we have struggled with dive surveys in the inshore due to bad weather – will be extremely interesting to see what lies at depth here.....